

RE-IMAGINING PRAYER: A CONGREGATIONAL STRATEGY TO DEEPEN THE
PRACTICE AND UNDERSTANDING OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER IN A
POSTMODERN CONTEXT

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With gratitude to the good people of Zion Lutheran Church in Des Moines, Iowa, who
long ago nursed me in the faith and planted seeds of prayer.

All this is very crude and condensed, but there are certain things that I'm anxious to say simply and clearly—things that we so often like to shirk. Whether I shall succeed is another matter. . . . I hope it may be of some help for the church's future.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*

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PREFACE

Many years ago, as a young pastor in a new parish I made a bad decision. I decided to change the version of the Lord's Prayer the congregation prayed every Sunday. My thinking was the new, more modern-language version of the Lord's Prayer had been published for many years in our "new" hymnal, and besides, my former congregation had prayed the new version for years, and I didn't see why this congregation would not want to do the same. So, with little warning, I changed the version of the Lord's Prayer in worship one Sunday.

This change was immediately met with resistance, questioning, anger, and even some tears. I had no idea I was placing my finger upon such a sensitive nerve. After a few weeks of brutal fall-out, I relented and went back to the "old" version with "Who art" and "Thy," and once again there was peace. The lesson: attempting to change the way people pray is dangerous business; one is treading on holy ground. One must either tread carefully or grow very thick skin.

The process of re-examining the ways we were taught to pray by our Sunday-school teachers, pastors, and parents can shake some Christians to their core. After all, prayer, along with scripture and the sacraments, is a central and sacred part of the Christian faith. As American priest and theologian Matthew Fox states, "the essence of religion is spirituality and the essence of spirituality is how we understand and practice prayer."¹ It is, therefore, all-the-more surprising to me I am plummeting headlong into a dissertation on prayer. Yet, I am drawn to the topic because I believe there is at present

¹ Matthew Fox, *Prayer: A Radical Response to Life*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2001), xxiii.

an acute need for a relevant, timely, and renewed rethinking on the topic of Christian prayer.

For many of us, prayer goes back to those holy moments when our parents and grandparents taught us how to say our first prayers, often at such tender and nourishing times as bed and meals. I realize, therefore, this thesis on prayer will inevitably and undoubtedly step on some (perhaps many) toes. It is sacred ground and I do not tread upon it thoughtlessly. However, I believe most anything which causes us to more deeply think and dialog about prayer must be, overall, a good thing. Even if the reader should disagree with everything I posit in this paper, good may still come from it if it increases the thoughtfulness of his or her own life of prayer. Still, I doubt few will disagree with everything put forth, and I suspect some may warmly embrace some of the views set forth on prayer in this writing. I hope it may come to some as sweet relief and a renewed understanding of the practice of Christian prayer.

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I wish to thank the people of Faith Lutheran Church, who allowed me to carry out this Lenten project, contributing their time, energy and resources to make it a success. I could not have completed this paper without your loving support and encouragement. I also wish to thank my advisor, The Reverend Dr. Ken Swetland, who gently encouraged me with his affirmations and kept me going when I thought I would not finish. Thank you to my three sons, Joseph, Justin and Kristopher, who are my inspirations in life and prayer. Finally, and most importantly, thank you to my husband, David, who read each chapter of this work and offered his kind corrections, suggestions, and encouragement. I truly could not have completed this project without your love and support.

ABSTRACT

This thesis-project explores the assumptions and practice of prayer by Christians in contemporary Western culture. As our churches experience decline, so also prayer for many Christians has become perfunctory and burdensome. Many Christians still pray as they did when they were children, as there has been little Christian adult teaching on prayer in view of our postmodern context. This thesis-project posits that given a broader, more biblical, and ancient understanding of Christian prayer, lay-people can re-imagine and experience prayer as an organic, authentic, and life-giving expression of their Christian faith. A six-week congregational-based Lenten project on prayer was created and carried out to test this thesis, with encouraging results.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

A friend recently remarked to me that she was going to “quit praying.” When I asked why, she said, “Well, God already knows what He is going to do anyway, and I don’t get anything out of it - I don’t really feel anything when I pray . . . it’s just another thing I feel guilty about not doing.” This is no embittered apostate, on the contrary, I know this person to be a life-long Christian who is active in her church. Though anecdotal, I believe this person represents the sentiments and frustration of many contemporary Christians.

The practice of both private and corporate prayer is in a troubled state. This simple assertion is a premise of this thesis-project. If every Christian’s prayer-life were satisfactory and fulfilling, there would be no need for such a project. Several authors and theologians attest to the disquieting state of prayer among Christians today, as the back cover-jacket of one classic book on prayer reads, “Is your personal prayer life giving you problems? Read this book. It will clear your mind about your need for prayer and strengthen your will to do it.”¹ Many Christians believe the desire to pray should come naturally to those of us who understand ourselves to be children of God. Yet many would resonate with Pastor Malcolmb Goldsmith’s experience when he confesses, “I have struggled with prayer for many years. I have tried getting up at 5:30 a.m. for an hour or two in prayer, Bible reading, and reflection . . . following books; trying new patterns . . . retreats. More often than not the end result seemed to be the experience of

¹ Sherwood Eliot Wirt, quoted on back-cover of *Prayer*, by O. Hallesby, trans. Clarence J. Carlsen (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1994).

talking to nothing and hearing a deafening silence in return.”² Unfortunately, Pastor Goldsmith’s experiences are not unique.

Professor Roberta Bondi in her classic book, *To Pray and to Love*, summarizes well the challenges many Christians wrestle with regarding this most basic of Christian practices. “In spite of all these ways of coming to prayer, however, many praying Christians have one thing in common: they lack confidence in their prayer. Even though they may pray daily . . . they believe that they are not praying ‘right’.” She goes on to observe that many Christians feel they “ought to be praying harder, or more unselfishly, or with more concentration, or with more faith, or more systematically, or in a more centered way. Some of them are truly demoralized about prayer . . . others feel vaguely guilty; still others, sad.”³ Anglican Bishop and New Testament scholar John Robinson, writes of the relief he personally experienced when he learned a fellow seminarian also felt guilty about the overall lack of meaning he found in prayer:

But I have not forgotten the relief with which twenty years ago, back at my theological college, I discovered . . . a kindred spirit, to whom also the whole of the teaching we received on prayer . . . meant equally little. . . . To realize that after all one might not be the chief of sinners, or the only man out of step, lifted a load of secret. . . . Yet to question it openly is to appear to let down the side, to be branded as hopelessly unspiritual, and to cause others to stumble.⁴

In my experience, with few exceptions, there are two types of Christians when it comes to prayer: (1) those who think they know how to pray but believe they do not pray enough, or (2) those who believe they do not know how to pray at all. Both consider themselves failures at prayer, and both are, thankfully, wrong. If we are honest, most of

² Malcolm Goldsmith, *Knowing Me Knowing God: Exploring Your Spirituality with Myers-Briggs* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 11.

³ Roberta C. Bondi, *To Pray and to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 9.

⁴ John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), 19-20.

us do not have the prayer-life we believe we should have, neither in quantity or quality. Christians desperately need a new understanding of what prayer is and is not, and how we can be faithful people of and in prayer.

To arrive at correct answers, one must begin with the right questions. So, I begin with one obvious question, “How can this be?” With all the books, retreats, sermons, teaching, and meetings on prayer, how can our collective Christian prayer lives fail so miserably and universally? It will probably not come as a surprise to the reader that I, too, have struggled with prayer, both practically and conceptually. For years, I was unsure what prayer was, or at least was meant to be. Even as an ordained pastor serving a congregation, I was uncertain what I should be doing or not doing during both private and corporate prayer. I struggled with how to regularly integrate prayer into my daily life. I felt guilty when I told someone I would pray for them, and then wondered if I would, actually, *pray* for them. I wondered why we as Christians strive so hard to pray regularly. Why did most every Christian I know (to include leaders in the church) consider prayer a deficit in their spiritual life? Why was “daily devotions” continually on so many of our “to do” lists? I could not help but wonder if it was because, somehow, we were going about it all wrong. After all, who would want to spend time with someone who had to work so hard at spending time with them? I certainly would not enjoy the company of a person who viewed the time they spent with me as a “discipline.” For the remainder of this chapter, we will explore some of the assumptions about prayer, both within and outside the Church, and reasons why Christian prayer may be difficult and discouraging for so many.

Pietistic Expectations

Many Christians of a variety of stripes share the assumption that “good Christians” should practice a daily discipline of prayer and Bible reading. I believe we should examine this assumption. We have already noted that many Christians struggle with prayer in general. One of the reasons for this struggle and accompanying sense of failure surrounding prayer is unquestionably due to the legalistic and extra-biblical expectations Pietism has imposed upon people of faith, especially within the Protestant traditions.

To begin, there is no biblical mandate nor precedent that one should or must have a “daily devotional time.” Yet many Christians assume this is a Divine expectation and Christian norm. For example, Pastor and author Kevin Harney bemoans that nearly every seminarian he worked with contritely confessed they were too busy to maintain a daily time of prayer and scripture reading.⁵ The authors of the book, *Resilient Ministry*, lament, “many people preparing for the ministry abandon needed spiritual disciplines while in training. All three of us found it difficult to remain faithful in Bible study and prayer with the pressures of seminary exams and term papers.”⁶ In my reading and conversations over the years, I have witnessed many pastors and lay people alike fretting over their perceived deficiency of disciplined daily devotions.

We must ask the question, “When did this practice become a standard expectation for Christians?” Since the inception of Christianity two-thousand years ago, not only have most Christians been illiterate, but even if they could read, they did not possess a

⁵ Kevin Harney, *Leadership from the Inside Out: Examining the Inner Life of a Healthy Church Leader* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 47.

⁶ Bob Burns, Tasha D. Chapman, and Donald C. Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013) E-book, chapter four.

Bible. Daily scripture reading has only been possible in the last three-hundred years of the faith, which, perhaps not coincidentally, coincides with the spread of Pietism as a movement. Yet, it now seems this practice of daily prayer and Bible reading has become a presumed measure of one's spiritual health, especially in Protestant circles.

Unfortunately for many of us, when prayer is added to our daily "to-do" list, it often becomes perfunctory. The difficulty of maintaining pietistic disciplines has no doubt led to the dismay and frustration of many well-intended Christians when it comes to prayer.

A "Hail Mary" Understanding of Prayer

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the "Hail Mary" understanding of prayer. This term, as used in this paper, has nothing to do with the Roman Catholic practice of the rosary, but rather refers to prayer which is employed only as a last-ditch resort. In the classic Christmas movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, Jimmy Stewart, playing the role of George Bailey, is in an acute, suicidal moment of desperation. He folds his hands and prays, "Dear Father in heaven, I'm not a praying man, but if you're up there and you can hear me [begins crying softly] show me the way . . . show me the way." Likewise, Billy Chapel, played by Keven Costner in the baseball movie, *For the Love of the Game*, is on the cusp of pitching a perfect game. However, as he stands on the mound throwing the final pitches of the game (and his entire career), his shoulder becomes inflamed. In that poignant moment of need, he prays under his breath, almost reluctantly, "Lord, I know that I always said I'd never involve you in a baseball game . . . it always seemed silly. I mean, you've got enough to do – but if there's any way you could make this pain in my shoulder go away for about 10 minutes [trails off as the crowd cheers]."

These two Hollywood examples, unfortunately, typify many peoples' view of what prayer is and how it is done. For most Americans, many of whom are nominal Christians, the unspoken assumption goes something along the lines: "While a person can pray at any time, usually prayer is a last resort. When we are in a tight spot or at the end of our rope we pray to God, and hopefully, perhaps due to our deep sincerity and great need, God will intervene to save us, or at least do something to help us." The problems with this theology become obvious under examination: such an understanding of prayer, assumed by so many and promoted by popular culture, serves to truncate and compartmentalize the practice of prayer. Such widely-held beliefs surrounding prayer undermine rather than strengthen our relationship with God, as they relegate our faith and prayers to times of crises. Such notions cause us to pray less rather than more, and they promote both a superficial and transactional relationship with God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who was hanged in a concentration camp for his opposition to the Nazi regime, wrote of this tempting tendency in his final days in prison. He reflected with some sadness upon Christians' propensity to view God as a *deus ex machina*, as a "plot twist" whereby a person who is painted into a corner and has no way out suddenly is rescued by a surprising and unforeseen intervention of some sort. "Religious people speak of God when human knowledge (perhaps simply because they are too lazy to think) has come to an end, or when human resources fail – in fact it is always the *deus ex machina* that they bring on to the scene, either for the apparent solution of insoluble problems, or as strength in human failure."⁷ Bonhoeffer taught we should not consign God to the "boundaries" of our lives, but rather advocated that God

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, Touchstone edition, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 281-82.

should be the “center” and foundational force of our lives, of whom we speak “not in weaknesses but in strength.”⁸ In other words, God should be the strong center of our lives upon Whom we stand, not our last resort “Hail Mary.”

Immature Practice of Prayer

I once was at a conference where the speaker invited us to draw a scene. Paper and colored markers were at each table. He instructed us to draw a home on a sunny day with children playing outdoors, some trees, and birds in the sky. There was giggling as we drew, laughing at our own artistic ineptitude. Of course, there were a few who drew very lovely pictures, but most of us fell back on stick figures and rudimentary shapes. The leader then asked, “How many of you would have drawn roughly the same picture when you were nine years old?” Almost everyone’s hand went up. “For most people, it’s the same with prayer,” he said, “we still pray as we did when we were nine.”

Matthew Fox relays the story of a thirty-seven-year-old business man and father who wanted to pass on his faith to his teenage son. He asked Fox, “I know that I still pray like I did when I was a child. Surely there must be such a thing as an adult way of praying? How can I pass on an adult faith to my teenaged son?”⁹ Likewise, a study of Roman Catholic seminarians by child-psychologist David Elkind found the young men “held notions of prayer identical to schoolboys aged twelve to fourteen, talking to God, for example, as if he (always he) were a superego in the sky.”¹⁰ Many of us, it seems, never “grow-up” in our prayer practices.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 282.

⁹ Matthew Fox, *Prayer: A Radical Response to Life* (New York: Penguin Group, 2001), xxiii-xxiv.

¹⁰ Fox, *Prayer*, xxiv.

While we teach our children to pray, the Christian Church at large does not do a good job of teaching adults to pray. It has been said “Jesus played with children and taught adults; the Church teaches children and the adults play.”¹¹ Thus, many adults are infantilized when it comes to prayer in both form and content. We fold our hands, close our eyes, bow our heads, and ask God for things. Like a child, our prayers remain very “me-centered.” As Bishop Shelby Spong notes, “the popular prayers of most people are little more than adult letters written to a Santa Claus God.”¹² Or, in the words of comedian Flip Wilson, “I’m gonna pray now; anyone want anything?”¹³

Several years ago, I was visiting with an elderly couple in their home on a pastoral visit when the phone rang. This was back in the days of answering machines and “caller I.D.” The woman got up to see who was calling. Upon seeing the caller I.D., she raised her eyebrows knowingly as she looked to her husband and said rather flatly, “It’s Gail.” As she answered the phone, the husband, I suppose feeling the need to explain, said to me, “Gail is our daughter, she lives about twenty minutes away.” Then he paused and said hesitantly, “She only calls when she wants something.” That scene stuck with me. Did my parents feel that way when I called? Then, on a deeper level, I wondered if God felt that way when I prayed? “Oh, it’s Renee again, (sigh) . . . she only prays when she wants something — what is it now?”

The popularity of the “Prayer of Jabez” in the early part of this century is an unfortunate example of how such an immature, me-centered form of prayer can go viral

¹¹ I read this years ago but do not remember the source. In many churches, while the children are expected to attend Sunday School, there is no similar expectation for adults.

¹² John Shelby Spong, “Spong on Prayer,” Find and Ye Shall Seek, last modified June 2, 2007, <http://mysticalseeker.blogspot.com/2009/06/spong-on-prayer.html>.

¹³ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 32.

within Christian circles. *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*, was written by Bruce Wilkinson in 2000. This little ninety-eight-page book sold an astounding nine-million copies in its first two years. The book made the New York Times best-seller list and was chosen as the “Jordan Christian Book of the Year” by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, receiving the Gold Medallion Award. The prayer is based on one obscure genealogical passage within the Hebrew Scriptures:

Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, “Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!” And God granted what he asked.¹⁴

The theology of the book is at best naive and at worst self-serving and greedy. It panders to those who are looking for a quick, easy way to material wealth and prosperity. In it, Wilkerson writes, “I challenge you to make the Jabez prayer for blessing part of the daily fabric of your life. To do that, I encourage you to follow unwaveringly the plan outlined here for the next thirty days. By the end of that time, you'll be noticing significant changes in your life.”¹⁵ Against such self-serving theology, Quaker author, Richard Foster, reminds us wryly that God is not our “cosmic bellhop.”¹⁶ Indeed, noted theologian Douglas Hall writes that Christians must take care to avoid five types of immature prayer, “(1) Prayer that helps us escape reality, (2) Prayer that turns us in upon ourselves; (3) Prayer that fails to represent our fellow creatures, especially those in need, (4) Prayer that is merely emotional or lacking in serious, disciplined thought; (5) Prayer

¹⁴ 1 Chr 4:9-10. All scripture citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, 1997, unless noted otherwise.

¹⁵ Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2000), 86.

¹⁶ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 16.

that does not lead to responsible acts of discipleship.”¹⁷ Disturbingly, it would seem Wilkerson’s use and promotion of the obscure prayer of Jabez fits the criteria of all five. On the other hand, the prayer Jesus modeled in the Garden of Gethsemane was of a very different nature: “Not my will but yours be done.”¹⁸

Returning to the art metaphor, I remember my Art instructor in high-school telling the class that the first step in learning to draw well was to “unlearn” how we drew as children. She said we needed to “see” in a whole new way. To aid us in this difficult endeavor, she turned the picture we were drawing upside-down, so we would literally unsee the picture, and surprisingly it worked, we drew better, more realistic pictures.¹⁹ Likewise, Matthew Fox writes about prayer, “Perhaps to learn to unpray may prove the first step for adult believers to return to the simple questions: What does prayer mean to us? How do we pray as adults? Where is prayer happening in our culture? Who is actually praying?”²⁰ Reflecting deeply on such questions with the help of other mature Christians may be the first step in learning to pray as an adult.

Some Problems with Petitions

Yet another reason prayer is problematic for so many lies its inherent theological difficulties, especially surrounding the practice of intercessory and petitionary prayer. Of course, not all prayer is petitionary in nature. However, one could reasonably argue petitions are the most common form of prayers offered. In other words, most prayers

¹⁷ Douglas J. Hall, *When You Pray: Thinking Your Way into God’s World*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 131.

¹⁸ Luke 22:42.

¹⁹ For more on using the “upside down” technique for training new artists, see “Upside Down Drawing,” All about Drawing.com, accessed July 17, 2018, <https://www.allaboutdrawings.com/upside-down-drawing.html>.

²⁰ Fox, *Prayer*, xxiv.

consist of asking God to do something either on our behalf, or on behalf of another, usually a loved one. It does not take an enormous amount of reflection on such a practice before one encounters theological dilemmas and questions. For example, why does God choose to intervene on behalf of some and not others? Is the degree of God's intervention directly related to the number and intensity of the prayers offered? Does God somehow need or desire our prayers in order to act?

There is an Episcopal Bishop who tells the story of his wife, who in 1981 was given a diagnosis of cancer which was almost certainly fatal. Being a prominent Episcopal priest, news spread quickly. Prayer groups were formed within congregations and across denominations and dioceses. When remission occurred beyond anything the doctors believed was possible, the people who offered the most ardent and supportive prayers began to exclaim excitedly, "Our prayers are working!" While very grateful for the care and concern people showed, as well as for the remission of the disease, the Bishop found that internally, he became increasingly uncomfortable with the belief that God had been influenced by people's prayers. He wondered to himself, "Would someone's wife who received a similar diagnosis, yet who was not so well connected to the Christian community, be in worse shape due to lack of prayers on her behalf?"²¹

If God is influenced by the intensity and number of prayers offered for a certain cause, then one corollary assumption must be that God can heal people or intervene on their behalf, but sometimes chooses not to, perhaps because not enough people prayed(?). Why would a loving God not always choose to intervene on behalf of those suffering? To this question one might respond that perhaps God is letting us learn some sort of

²¹ John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 141-42.

greater lesson, or perhaps we brought the calamity upon ourselves. For example, some Christian evangelicals such as the Reverend Franklin Graham (son of Billy Graham), inferred in the wake of Hurricane Katrina that the storm struck New Orleans because it was an evil city reaping due judgement for its sin. Franklin proclaimed at a conference at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, a month after the storm, "[New Orleans] is known for Mardi Gras, for Satan worship. It's known for sex perversion. It's known for every type of drugs and alcohol and the orgies and all of these things that go on down in there in New Orleans. There's been a black spiritual cloud over New Orleans for years."²² But what then do we make of all those innocents who prayed for deliverance from the Holocaust, or of the tornado that strikes an elementary school in Kansas, or of parents who pray for healing for their children, yet their prayers go unanswered?

Others might say such calamities and tragedy are a sign of the sinfulness and brokenness of our world as a whole, not of the individuals involved. Yet, are we to then to believe that God decides to intervene (or not) on behalf of the suffering based upon the number and intensity of prayers offered? As theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote in the eighteenth century, "If we only believe, as very many do, that our prayers throw some additional weight onto the scale; either way, what a narrowing of our mental condition accompanies such a belief!"²³ At best such an understanding makes God capricious and unfair, at worst it makes God immoral. As Bishop Spong so succinctly states, "we cannot reconcile human tragedy with a benevolent deity who has supernatural

²² Robert S. McElvaine, *Grand Theft Jesus: The Hijacking of Religion in America* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008), 36.

²³ Friedrich Schleiermacher, "The Power of Prayer in Relation to Outward Circumstances: Selected Sermons of Schleiermacher," Bible Hub, accessed September 23, 2016, http://biblehub.com/library/schleiermacher/selected_sermons_of_schleiermacher/i_the_power_of_prayer.htm.

power.”²⁴ This summarizes some of the acute problems with a very popular form of Christian prayer. If some of our prayers are to be petitionary in nature, as Jesus modeled, we need a radically different and new understanding of petitionary prayer.

Thesis Context: The Decline of the Western Christian Church

Recently I stood in the midst of my congregation as a few tears slipped from my eyes and ran down my cheeks, in spite of my best effort to hold them back. Those who know me will testify I am not given to tears easily. We were singing one of my favorite Psalm refrains,

*Shepherd Me, O God,
Beyond my wants,
Beyond my needs,
From death into life.*²⁵

I suppose I was crying because it reminded me of many years before when I sang this same psalmody in a vibrant congregation, and I saw so clearly what a beautiful and transcendent time that had been. I was weeping because the music and singing were still so earnest, if not as glorious. I was crying because now I stood in the middle of a different congregation, every bit as beautiful and brave, though smaller and in decline. Yet this congregation sang with all the conviction and strength they could muster. I was crying because the mother that had nursed and raised me, my Mother Church, was dying, and it seemed there was nothing I could do to stop it. The occasion brought to my mind the poignant words of Alfred Lord Tennyson:

Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days

²⁴ John Shelby Spong, *Eternal Life: A New Vision* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 120.

²⁵ Marty Haugen, “Shepherd Me, O God,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), Hymn 780.

Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.²⁶

All to say I do not write of the decline of the Christian Church in North American lightly. It has been painful to watch and experience. Yet the fact remains: Christianity in North America is in decline. White Mainline Protestant, White Evangelical Protestant, Black Protestant, and Roman Catholic Churches have all experienced slow yet significant regression in both membership and participation since the 1980s. Conversely, the religiously unaffiliated, known as the “Nones” have grown to twenty-five percent of the American population. Nearly four in ten young adults (ages 18-29) are currently unaffiliated religiously, indicating this trend will likely increase over time.²⁷ As Hall writes, “We do not need statisticians and sociologists to inform us that religion—and specifically *our* religion, as the dominant expression of the spiritual impulse of *homo sapiens* in our geographic context—is in decline.”²⁸ Though some congregations are still in denial, there is no refuting the general downward trend-lines of Christian churches in the United States in recent decades.

The decline of the North American Christian Church serves as one of the key backdrops for understanding contemporary Christian prayer in the United States. As noted earlier, prayer is a foundational spiritual practice for Christians, individually and corporately. In short, we pray as we believe. Therefore, to understand how we might

²⁶ Alfred Lord Tennyson, “Ulysses,” Sparknotes, accessed September 17, 2017, <http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/tennyson/section4.rhtml>.

²⁷ Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, Betsy Cooper, and Rachel Lienesch, “Exodus: Why Americans Are Leaving Religion – and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back,” PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute), September 22, 2016, <http://www.prri.org/research/prri-rns-2016-religiously-unaffiliated-americans/>.

²⁸ Douglas John Hall, *Waiting for Gospel: An Appeal to Dispirited Remnants of Protestant “Establishment”* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), Introduction.

best approach and renew the practice of prayer within our present context, we must acknowledge with bold-faced honesty the worsening condition of the contemporary American Christian Church, the decline of faith traditions in general, and the increasingly secular culture in which Christians form their prayers.

Interestingly, though the Church is in decline, individual spirituality is not. As Rabbi Rami Shapiro notes, “Most of these so-called *Nones* are not dismissive of God or spirituality but simply find religious labels and affiliation too narrow and constraining.”²⁹ Some theologians have suggested the rise in technology and social media results in people who yearn even more for spirituality and ultimate meaning. “The attempt to eliminate the roots of our lives made by the technological society in fact are compelling more and more reflective persons to assert these roots. From the oppressed rises the spiritual.”³⁰ It seems clear many people are separating their spirituality from the practice of institutional religion. A growing number of Americans self-identify as “spiritual but not religious.” The problem with such individual spirituality is it is neither rooted nor communal, and therefore risks being both shallow and narcissistic.

As with all change, there is opportunity. Religious institutions may have at this juncture an opening to meet the inherent and intuitive spiritual needs of people—if they can learn to translate their rich traditions, history, and liturgy into language and practices that will resonate with the intrinsic and existential needs of people who think and live in a postmodern world. This is not about marketing, rather it is about rethinking our theology and deconstructing our practices. As Hall writes, “The only thing that can salvage a

²⁹ Rami Shapiro, *Perennial Wisdom for the Spiritually Independent: Sacred Teachings Annotated and Explained*, (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2013), xiii.

³⁰ Fox, *Prayer*, 75.

moribund religion is a lively recovery of its life-giving essence. If that which first excited human interest cannot be rediscovered and communicated in some tangible and timely way, a religion is likely doomed.”³¹ How, then, do we as God’s people talk about God and talk to God in our current cultural context with both intellectual and spiritual integrity? This is *metanoia* work. The church needs to “repent,” in the literal sense of the word: we need to think (*noia*) above (*meta*) and beyond our usual language and practices. The time has come to reimagine Christian prayer. This is the purpose of this paper and congregational project.

Now that the problem has been clearly defined, it is time to set forth the theme and thesis of this paper. The context is the death and rebirth of the Christian Church as we know it. It is the view of this author that we have no say in whether the Church will die and be reborn, it will happen. This rebirth may be delayed, repressed, or even denied, but it is in fact coming. Our culture’s image and understanding of God and the world is already being changed and renewed in this postmodern age. The only question is what will our role be as leaders of the future Church? Some options are: (1) we may assist in this rebirth, or (2) work to repress the rebirth and maintain the status quo, or (3) we may choose to abandon the Church altogether. This paper and research project are written in part to assist church leaders in the first option, to serve as mid-wives in this painful though necessary and exciting birthing process.

Of course, there are many ways leaders may assist in the complex and uncertain process of rebirth. The scope of this paper and project has been narrowed to the topic of Christian prayer. The thesis of this project is: *Given a broader, biblical, and ancient*

³¹ Hall, *Waiting for Gospel*, Introduction.

understanding of what prayer is (and is not), church leaders can help reform and expand people's understanding and practice of Christian prayer, enabling people to enjoy the sacred practice of prayer in new and meaningful ways. Prayer is, quite simply, connection. Whenever we are connecting in meaningful, life-giving ways with God, others, the world or even ourselves, we are practicing a form of Christian prayer. If Christians can be helped to understand and empowered to practice broader and deeper forms of prayer, as will be set forth in this paper, it may help in this rebirthing process of the Church which is already underway, with or without us.

Assumptions, Methodology, and Parameters of the Project

In the following chapters we will reconsider both the biblical and theological foundations of prayer. First, we will explore in the next chapter the question: “To Whom do we pray?” We will look at pre-modern, modern and post-modern conceptions of God, and deliberate how these perceptions impact and shape our current practice of prayer. We will reflect upon the image and understanding of God’s nature as presented in the Scriptures and by the witness of the faithful through the ages. We will make a case for Panentheism as the biblical and orthodox understanding of God, as opposed to Supernatural Theism.

In chapter three we will undertake the questions of why and how Christians might pray in view of this broader and deeper understanding of our relationship with God. We will plumb both the biblical witness of prayer and theological motives for prayer. We will explore prayer as an organic part of a Christian’s life, rather than as a daily discipline. We will also consider what, exactly, do we hope to accomplish when we pray,

why do we pray, and what happens when we pray? The Lord's Prayer as well as other biblical passages will be examined. We will discuss the parameters and purpose of petitionary prayer. Finally, we will consider the testimony and practice of saints throughout the ages who experienced prayer in a variety of life-giving ways.

In chapter four we will explore several culminating themes surrounding prayer. The tragic compartmentalization between the sacred and secular lives of Christians will be discussed. An examination of the foundational Hebrew understanding of life, spirituality, and prayer will be undertaken. We will consider whether Christians are called to withdraw from the world or immerse themselves into the world. Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 will be reviewed as a backdrop for interpreting the possible meaning of Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity" and its implications. Finally, we will reflect on the oneness and compassion that is formed between ourselves, creation, and others through prayer via the Holy Spirit.

After our theological and biblical foundations have been established, the congregational-based research project, entitled: *"40 Days of Prayer: Connecting Prayer and Life: A Lenten Journey of Prayer Connecting with God, Self, and Others"* will be addressed. Chapter five will discuss the project as it was executed in detail. The project will take place during the season of Lent, but it could be conducted during any six-week time-period of the year. The project consists of five lines of effort: (1) A Wednesday evening Lenten service "Prayer Meditation," (2) Wednesday evening Small Group Discussions; (3) Thematic Sunday School "Prayer Practices;" (4) A Sunday morning sermon-series on prayer; and (5) Sunday morning congregational prayers. Each of these components will be explored in detail in chapter five. Chapter five will also describe the

assessment instruments used to measure the successes and failures of this project. The names of congregants mentioned in this paper and in the appendices have been changed for privacy reasons.

Finally, in chapter six, I will discuss the observations, insights, outcomes, lessons learned, and recommendations that come forth from this research project. The three congregational assessments will be analyzed and discussed in detail. I will note those aspects of the project that went well, and those that I would change or improve if I were to do it again. Thus, this final chapter might serve as a sort of guide for a pastor or lay-leader to use within their own congregation, should they wish to implement a similar program.

My research methodology consists of a quasi-experiment and a focus group to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the project. The quasi-experiment is in the form of a pre-event survey and a post-event survey. The surveys utilized both Likert and multiple-choice questions. After the project was complete, a focus-group was conducted to glean more qualitative and personal feedback from some of the congregational members who consistently participated in the project. The results of these research instruments are discussed in detail in the final chapter.

The issue of what pronouns this paper will use for “God” is difficult and somewhat provocative. Since one of the goals of this work is to broaden the Christian understanding of God, the traditional use of male-based pronouns is undesirable. Some authors have chosen to remedy this dilemma by not using pronouns at all, and instead use the words “God,” or “Godself,” solely. This does not work as well as one might hope or suppose. Consider the sentence, “God is gathering a people to Godself.” It works, but it

is clumsy. Yet another approach has been to alternate male and female pronouns for God throughout one's work. This seems a reasonable compromise, but in my mind still is undesirable as it can be discombobulating to go back and forth between "him" and "her."

For these reasons and others, which I will discuss in chapter two, I have chosen to use the Jewish "YHWH" as an alternate reference for God. I realize such a term may give some readers pause, yet this is not wholly undesirable. Causing readers to pause and reconsider their default image of God would be a positive outcome of this paper. Still, this approach is not a perfect solution. I welcome the day our syntax might evolve to accommodate better ways of expressing the term "God" that is less anthropomorphic and male-dominated. I should note several authors I quote within this work use the traditional male pronouns for God. I have chosen to let these stand, trusting the reader will make note of the masculine language and ponder it accordingly.

Most of what I will say in this paper is not unique or new, as I imagine most everything in the chapters that follow has been said before in a variety of better ways. However, the broad concepts presented here run counter to some of the prevailing and common assumptions about prayer held by many Christians today. This thesis lays out how we might, in some very simple and practical ways, think about and practice prayer differently, both privately and corporately. Like many people, I have struggled with prayer and had a somewhat contentious relationship with it for many years. I identify with Jacob who wrestled with the Angel, saying, "I will not let you go until you bless me."³² This dissertation is the fruit of that struggle and blessing.

³² Gen 32:26.

CHAPTER TWO

THE GOD TO WHOM WE PRAY

What I have tried to say, in a tentative and exploratory way, may seem to be radical, and doubtless to many heretical. The one thing of which I am fairly sure is that, in retrospect, it will be seen to have erred in not being nearly radical enough.

—John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*

Einstein purportedly said, “If I had only one hour to save the world, I would spend fifty-five minutes defining the problem, and five minutes finding the solution.” Though this quote is most likely apocryphal, the point is taken: often the most difficult part of correctly solving a problem is rightly identifying it. Before we address the questions of what, why, when, and how we pray, we should first be very clear on the point of, “To Whom do we pray?” Usually this question is not asked in Christian circles because it is assumed we all know and agree upon the answer. After all, many Christians have attended church and prayed all their lives. How could there be any confusion about who God is?

Our Image of God and Prayer

Years ago, I attended an interfaith conference at which I happened to be seated next to a Jewish Rabbi. Naturally, the two of us introduced ourselves and chatted for a few minutes before the conference began. When the speaker came on stage we were asked to rise. Then the speaker said, “Let us pray.” While I was bowing my head and folding my hands, I noticed at the same time the Rabbi next to me opened his arms with

palms up and lifted his head. That memory has stayed with me and I have since wondered what our prayer posture might reveal about our understanding of both God and prayer.

Our image of God largely determines how we pray. If we view God as an all-powerful critical judge sitting on his throne, we will likely approach prayer with our head and eyes cast down. If our image of God is that of a grandfatherly-type of Being up in heaven, then we may view God as kind, but distant and perhaps a little preoccupied. If we think of God as a Spirit living within us, then we may feel a sense of intimacy with God, etc. Our view of Jesus, likewise, parallels this thought. Some possible understandings are “The Divine Jesus,” the “Conquering Jesus,” “Jesus the Judge,” the “Accepting Jesus,” etc.¹ Clearly how we view God is important, especially when it comes to the practice of prayer. It follows we Church leaders would do well to assist people in identifying their primary images of God and help them to broaden their understanding in keeping with the rich and varied biblical and historical Christian tradition.

The dominate, though perhaps unconscious and inadvertent view of God which pervades Western Christianity today is as follows: God is a Supernatural Being, separate from the world and creation, who created the world a long time ago and now resides in heaven. “He” is identified, either consciously or unconsciously, as a male who can and sometimes chooses to intervene in supernatural ways within the world and our personal lives. God is a separate being, out there, in whose existence we may or may not believe. Belief in such a God is understood as central to our salvation as a Christian. Throughout

¹ Douglas John Hall, *When You Pray: Thinking Your Way into God's World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 14-18.

this paper, I will borrow a term used by many twentieth century theologians to describe this common conceptualization of God, namely, “Supernatural Theism.”² Before I set forth a broader and more faithful biblical understanding of God, I will briefly discuss some of the inadequacies and dangers of Supernatural Theism as a default concept of God.

The Drawbacks of Supernatural Theism

When I was a child, I went to church every Sunday. My pastor was a slight man with sandy brown hair and round wire-rimmed glasses. I do not remember anyone ever telling me what God looked like, but I do remember clearly how I imagined God. I pictured God as a man, specifically as my pastor. He sat on a cloud with his legs crossed “Indian style.” That was my image of God as a young child for several years. That was who I saw when I closed my eyes in prayer, whether at church or at home. I knew that my pastor was not God, but I suppose I did not know any other way to picture God, so I anthropomorphized God by imagining YHWH as the most holy person I could think of: my pastor.

One of the problems with Supernatural Theism is its “god” is too small. Imagining God as “up in heaven” smacks of Deism. God becomes remote, viewed as a God who created the world and then stepped back to watch it all from “His” perch above—not unlike a watchmaker who creates a watch, winds it up, and then lets it run its course. While a Deist does not believe God would intervene miraculously, Supernatural

² John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), 30-44, and Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 11-12.

Theism views God as having the power to intervene as “He” wills. In the view of Supernatural Theism, God may be moved by a person’s prayers, and thus choose to act on one’s behalf, though most believe God does so only occasionally.

Imagining God as a being “up in heaven” was not as problematic for premodern Christians because they viewed the universe as three-tiered. Examples abound, for instance, of scriptures written in a pre-modern worldview which presents a three-tiered conception of the universe, namely heaven above, the Earth in the middle, and hell below.³ This cosmological view that the Earth is both stable and the center of the universe is supported by several biblical texts.⁴ “On the day the Lord gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the Lord in the presence of Israel: ‘O sun, stand still over Gibeon, O moon, over the Valley of Aijalon.’ So, the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies.”⁵ The Roman Catholic church in 1632, used such passages to condemn Galileo’s work, which supported a Copernican, heliocentric universe. Galileo was persecuted and tried as a heretic.⁶ It took 360 years for the Vatican to make final peace with Galileo’s ideas, when in 1992, Pope John Paul II issued a paper declaring, “Galileo, who practically invented the experimental method, understood why only the Sun could function as the centre of the world.”⁷

³ Ps 139:8, Phil 2:10.

⁴ Ps 93:1, Eccl 1:5.

⁵ Josh 10:13.

⁶ To avoid being burned at the stake, Galileo recanted and was given a sentence of house-arrest due to his advanced years.

⁷ Pope John Paul II, “Allocution of the Holy Father John Paul II,” October 31, 1992, <http://bertie.ccsu.edu/naturesci/Cosmology/GalileoPope.html#fnB0>. This speech may also be found in *The Emergence of Complexity in Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Biology: Proceedings of the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences*, (Vatican City: Pontificia Academia Scientiarum, distributed by Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), page numbers unknown.

The point is, given a pre-modern, three-tiered understanding of the world, imagining God as “up in the sky” did not put God at too great a distance. God was understood as directly over the flat Earth, watching over all things. This seemed to make sense to many pre-modern people and worked as a part of their faith for thousands of years. However, given our understanding of the universe today, which scientists tell us is still expanding, imagining God as “up in the sky” is more problematic. Additionally, the Earth is round and not flat, making things awkward for people in Australia, for example. We also know now that the Earth is not, in fact, the center of the universe, but rather a speck in one corner of the vast universe. All these cosmological realities raise the natural question, “Where, exactly, is God if “He” is, indeed, ‘up in heaven’?” It would seem the larger our universe grows the farther away God becomes.

Such thinking can lead some Christians to feel they must choose between their faith in God and their understanding of modern science and knowledge. Some have left the church feeling that religion and science are mutually exclusive. Others stay in the pew, silently questioning what they really do believe about God. Others hope for some resolution between the two world-views. When I was young I believed there was no conflict between the Bible and science, and that science was actually “proving” the Bible correct. I did not see the conflict between scripture passages and the findings of Galileo, Newton, and Darwin. Those things I could not reconcile, I simply let ride, assuming the apparent conflict must be due to my lack of knowledge rather than because of it. However, as I matured in my understanding of God and the world, I found that either my faith must be renewed and enlarged, or I would lose it altogether. In defending such ideas as the six-day creation story, while rejecting evolution as a scientific fact,

“evangelicals have placed an entirely superfluous stumbling block before their neighbors and children, encouraging every young person who loves science to reject Christianity.”⁸

Recently my husband and I watched the 2003 movie *Bruce Almighty*. We enjoyed the movie as it was a comedy and made us laugh. Yet, I was given pause by the immature understanding of God the movie portrayed. Perhaps not surprisingly, the movie essentially depicted God in keeping with the theology of Supernatural Theism: God is an older male (played by Morgan Freeman) who is all-powerful and receives millions of prayer-requests each day. This conception of God as a Supernatural Being who sometimes will intervene miraculously on our behalf is problematic from many points of view. As discussed in the first chapter, it can make for a rather capricious rendering of God. Why would God miraculously heal one child of cancer and not another? And if the fervency of my prayers influences God, then does that mean the person whose prayers were not answered did not pray hard enough, or perhaps did not have enough faith? Indeed, it seems the more closely one reflects upon the belief that God sometimes intervenes in miraculous ways in answer to specific prayers, the more problematic and distasteful such a theology becomes for many modern and postmodern people. It can reasonably be argued the theology of Supernatural Theism which undergirds the practice of petitionary prayer as understood by many Christians today, is contributing to the silent withdrawal of many young people from the Church, and the decline of Christianity in Western culture.

C. S. Lewis wrote that conceiving of God as a grandfather in heaven “even at its crudest,” did no harm. After all, he wrote, “What soul ever perished for believing that

⁸ Michael Gerson, “Trump and the Evangelical Temptation,” *The Atlantic*, April 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/04/the-last-temptation/554066/>.

God the Father really has a beard?”⁹ As long as people understand the image of God with a beard is only a symbol for God, I would agree with Lewis. However, when this image of God becomes so entrenched that it becomes an indispensable part of one’s faith, then we have turned that image into an idol. This is precisely what Supernatural Theism has become for many Christians, and therefore it hinders rather than enhances an authentic relationship with God. As discussed in the first chapter, it is not surprising our nominal Christian culture at large has adopted a “Hail Mary” understanding of prayer, where people pray (and pray hard) only when they are in frantic need of a miracle. After all, if God is “up in heaven” which is an increasingly long ways away, and if God only intervenes occasionally, then it would make sense one probably should only trouble God when one needs something desperately, like a new kidney.

As stated in the previous chapter, the American Christian Church is in decline. The reasons for the decline of Christianity in the United States are likely complex and multifaceted. Theories abound. Some point to the clergy sexual-abuse scandals. Others blame the insular nature of churches and their lack of evangelism. Still others cite Christians’ failure to embrace progressive social issues. While some claim the church has departed from biblical teaching, others say worship services are too stodgy and out of touch. Others opine nostalgically we need to get back to “that Old-Time Religion.”

While there may (or may not) be some truth in each of these views, one recent, massive study provides what is most likely a central piece of the puzzle: Many Christians

⁹ C. S. Lewis, “Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer,” A Project Gutenberg Canada eBook, August 13, 2016, <https://gutenberg.ca/ebooks/lewiscs-letterstomalcolm/lewiscs-letterstomalcolm-00-h.html#chapter04>.

have simply “stopped believing” their religion’s teachings.¹⁰ According to the nonprofit Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), when given a list of reasons as to why they no longer identify with their childhood religion, most surveyed Americans indicated it was not due to any negative experiences, but rather that they simply “stopped believing in the religion’s teachings.” We must take seriously the possibility that the American Christian Church is in decline primarily because people, and young people in particular, have stopped believing in the God of Supernatural Theism; such a God has become irrelevant to their daily lives. A solid argument can be made the Church’s underlying image of God which is assumed by most Christians, namely, Supernatural Theism, is contributing to the decline of the American Church.

A God who is conceived of as “out there” is not a God who is involved in our daily life. Rather, the best place to encounter such a God is at church on Sundays. This is where “God’s people” gather to remember and worship “Him.” Sunday worship is seen as a sort of retreat from the world where Christians go to get their “spiritual batteries” recharged. But what happens if people at large decide their batteries seem fine, and/or they have found better ways to recharge them, such as playing a round of golf, or just sleeping in and reading the Sunday paper? The act of worshipping such a God as commonly perceived and understood by the Church is experienced by many (perhaps most?) Americans as remote and empty. Therefore, these weekly “pit stops” at church have become less and less a part of modern people’s lives.

¹⁰ Robert P Jones, Daniel Cox, Betsy Cooper, and Rachel Lienesch, “Exodus: Why Americans Are Leaving Religion – and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back,” PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute), September 22, 2016, <http://www.prri.org/research/prri-rns-2016-religiously-unaffiliated-americans/>.

This trend should perhaps not come as a surprise. Many prominent theologians have been sounding the theological alarm for decades. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor and theologian who opposed Hitler during WWII, was among the earliest. The imprisoned Bonhoeffer writes to a friend, “What is bothering me incessantly is the question of what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over . . . and that means the time of religion in general. We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore.”¹¹ This is not a one-off comment for Bonhoeffer. He writes often in his final years of the dawn of “religionless Christianity.” Though his meaning is debated by theologians, many believe Bonhoeffer was asserting that modern people as a whole could no longer accept many of the basic tenants of the Christian Church; and that Christianity itself would transcend institutional religion.

Bonhoeffer was not alone. Many twentieth-century theologians were critical of “Supernatural Theism” and predicted its slow demise; Ruldolf Bultmann, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich, John A. T. Robinson, Marcus Borg, and John S. Spong, to name just a few. In a similar vein, Robinson wrote in his now classic book, *Honest to God*, over fifty years ago, “Whatever we may accept with the top of our minds, most of us still retain deep down the mental image of ‘an old man in the sky’.”¹² He goes on to write:

Nevertheless, I am firmly convinced that this whole way of thinking can be the greatest obstacle to an intelligent faith – and indeed will progressively be so to all except the “religious” few. We shall eventually be no more able to convince men of the existence of God “out there” . . . than persuade them to take seriously the gods of Olympus. If Christianity is to survive, let alone to recapture ‘secular’

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, Touchstone Edition, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 279.

¹² Robinson, *Honest to God*, 27.

man, there is no time to lose in detaching it from this scheme of thought. . . . *Our concern is in no way to change the Christian doctrine of God but precisely to see that it does not disappear with this outmoded view*” [emphasis mine].¹³

Lest one may dismiss Robinson as radical, remarkably, Pope John Paul II expresses the same sentiment when he writes,

By virtue of her own mission, the Church has the duty to be attentive to the pastoral consequences of her teaching. Before all else, let it be clear that this teaching must correspond to the truth. But it is a question of knowing how to judge a new scientific datum when it seems to contradict the truths of faith. . . . Galileo, a sincere believer, showed himself to be more perceptive in this regard than the theologians who opposed him. The error of the theologians of the time, when they maintained the centrality of the Earth, was to think that our understanding of the physical world's structure was, in some way, imposed by the literal sense of the Sacred Scripture.¹⁴

Is it possible the Christian Church in the United States is approaching a tipping point? Is it possible to re-imagine God in a way that is both faithful to the biblical witness of those believers who have gone before us, while also embracing a modern understanding of the world in which we live? These are questions to which we will soon turn, and which will directly impact our practice of prayer. Before we do, however, I would like to address one other trend that, perhaps surprisingly, seems to be paralleling the decline of Christianity in North America: the rise of conservative evangelical Christianity.

Conservative Christianity Growth?

While there is no doubt that on a whole Christianity in North America has been in decline at a remarkable rate, there are those who assert the faith is thriving and even

¹³ Robinson, *Honest to God*, 43-44.

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, “Allocution of the Holy Father John Paul II,” October 31, 1992, <http://bertie.ccsu.edu/naturesci/Cosmology/GalileoPope.html#fnB0>.

growing in conservative evangelical enclaves. There is some research which supports this view. Indeed, there has been some push-back against the idea that our culture is becoming more “religion-less.” Prominent theologian and Anglican Bishop N. T. Wright claims, for example, that John A. T. Robinson is wrong about western Christianity being in decline:

At the same time as Robinson was writing, C. S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers and other apologists had an enormous following; Billy Graham was at the height of his popularity, with frequent visits to the United Kingdom; many churches were growing, not shrinking. . . . Robinson relies upon a thesis about secularization which has now been shown to be very time-limited.¹⁵

Likewise, some conservative church leaders allege that those churches which are losing members are precisely the churches who have given up on biblical faith.

Meanwhile, those who have stayed true to the Bible and its doctrines are doing well and even growing. Canadian professor of religion and culture, David Haskell, conducted a recent study in which he and his colleagues concluded, “Conservative Protestant theology, with its more literal view of the Bible, [was] a significant predictor of church growth while liberal theology leads to decline.”¹⁶ Haskell contends conservative churches are still growing, and that the more theologically conservative the pastor, the better the growth of the church. Thus, Haskell’s concluding remarks take aim at John S. Spong’s view (and book by the title) that “Christianity must change or die.”¹⁷ “While our research helps explains [*sic*] the dwindling ranks of liberal mainline congregations, it isn’t likely to bring much ‘joy to the world’ of mainliners, especially those on the

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, “Doubt about Doubt: Honest to God Forty Years On,” NTWright Page, copyright 2018, <http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/04/05/doubts-about-doubt-honest-to-god-forty-years-on/>.

¹⁶ David Haskell, “Liberal Churches are Dying, but Conservative Churches are Thriving,” *The Washington Post*, January 4, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/01/04/liberal-churches-are-dying-but-conservative-churches-are-thriving/?utm_term=.ce4bef477107.

¹⁷ See book by this title, John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, first published 1998).

theological left. But, if it's any consolation, when it comes to growth in mainline churches, Spong and other liberals are right to claim that Christianity must change or die. They just get the direction of the change wrong.”¹⁸

Larger studies, however, seem to tell us something different. While it is true the decline of conservative churches within western culture has not been as steep and did not start as early as that of mainline congregations, conservative Christian churches are, likewise, losing members. A Pew research study from 2015 confirms that while mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic churches are clearly in decline, evangelical Protestants, “while declining slightly as a percentage of the U.S. public, probably have grown in absolute numbers as the overall U.S. population has continued to expand.”¹⁹ The more recent and comprehensive study conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) released in September 2016, reveals “the number of white evangelical Protestants fell from about 23 percent of the US population in 2006 to 17 percent in 2016.”²⁰

Indeed, while some conservative church leaders have broadcasted the decline in mainline Protestant churches, it now appears conservative churches are also losing numbers, especially among the younger generation. “Today, only 11 percent of Evangelicals are under age 30, according to PRRI.”²¹ The decline of western Christianity is so precipitous, religion studies more than a decade old are no longer reliable and cannot be counted upon to give an accurate picture of the landscape. Thus, when Wright

¹⁸ David Haskell, “Liberal Churches are Dying.”

¹⁹ The Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Religion and Public Life, May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

²⁰ Harry Bruinius, “Amid Evangelical Decline, Growing Split Between Young Christians and Church Elders,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 10, 2017, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2017/1010/Amid-Evangelical-decline-growing-split-between-young-Christians-and-church-elders>.

²¹ Bruinius, “Amid Evangelical Decline.”

wrote his critique of Robinson in 2005, his claim that Robinson's view (that western culture is becoming more secularized) is "comic," is itself now suspect. Today it seems evident that all Christian denominations, liberal, mainline, African-American, Roman Catholic, and conservative alike, are losing members, albeit at different rates. Clearly the American Christian church in every corner is in decline.

The Church, like most institutions, is averse to change beyond window-dressing; indeed, even changing the window-dressing can throw a congregation into crisis. As famed management consultant Margaret Wheatley notes, "Humans usually default to the known when confronted with the unknown."²² There is always resistance to change, especially when the change impacts the most sacred and tender parts of our soul.

Unfortunately, some segments of the Christian Church which feel most threatened have become increasingly regressive, entrenched, and vocal. Feeling susceptible due to change, instability, and a gradual loss of control, we should not be surprised at the rising volume of conservative Christianity in our time. "As happens with every breakthrough into a new level of awareness, the fear present in the new is always more apparent than the opportunity that the breakthrough enables."²³ So also the mainline Church is slow to incorporate a contemporary world-view into its liturgical language and theology. For some, religion is perhaps more of a security blanket than an exploration into the heart of God. As religious leaders, we must help our parishioners understand the difference between a healthy and reflective dependence upon God, and an immature and immobile view of God. Many Christians are reluctant to renew or change that which brings them

²² Margaret Wheatley, *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2005), 4.

²³ John S. Spong, *Eternal Life: A New Vision*, (New York: HarperCollins), 37, Kindle.

comfort and security. Thus, western Christianity at large, and many congregations in particular, are crumbling bedrocks of antiquated thinking, language, and practice. Still, we should not be surprised if the candle burns brightest just before it goes out.

A Point of Crisis and Opportunity

The Western Church is crumbling, our theology and language about God are antiquated, and many people, especially the young, are leaving the Church and apparently not coming back. Harvey Cox, an ordained Baptist minister and professor at Harvard Divinity School, notes that those who cannot reconcile the Church's premodern theology with today's scientific and sociological understanding of the world simply walk away from religion and join what he calls "The Secular City."²⁴ Bishop Spong refers to such Christians as the burgeoning "Church Alumni Association."²⁵ It seems not only are the "Nones" on the rise in our society, but so are the "Dones." Presbyterian pastor Marjorie Thompson agrees, noting "many people are restless and dissatisfied with church as they have experienced it. God has not come alive for them through traditional religious institutions. . . . Many who feel dissatisfied or empty in their faith experience continue seeking spiritual nourishment through the church. Other have chosen to look elsewhere."²⁶

In view of our current situation, we might reconsider some of the voices of prophetic theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Though they have often

²⁴ Michael Stewart, "Book Summary: Harvey Cox *The Secular City: Secularisation and Urbanisation (A Theological Perspective)*," Chaplaincy Academy, February 2012, [http://www.chaplaincyacademy.com/files/The%20Secular%20City%20\(Cox,%20Stewart\).pdf](http://www.chaplaincyacademy.com/files/The%20Secular%20City%20(Cox,%20Stewart).pdf).

²⁵ Spong, *Eternal Life*, 131-132, Kindle.

²⁶ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 5.

been written off as radical threats to orthodox Christianity, they may in fact have been far-sighted—as well as sincere in their attempts to preserve the Christian faith. A reasonable argument can be made theologians such as Bultmann, Schleiermacher, Tillich, Bonhoeffer, Robinson, Borg, Spong and others gave their life-work to renew the biblical message by stripping away its cultural and historical garb and translating the heart of its meaning into language and concepts which could be understood and embraced by those living in a modern and post-modern culture. They could, therefore, be viewed as contemporary missionaries, attempting to form new ways to think and speak about God which made sense in a modern and/or postmodern world. In their own way, each worked to reveal and uphold the kernel of Christian faith they and others could integrate both spiritually *and* intellectually. Thus, their work should be viewed, I believe, not as a forsaking of the Christian faith, but rather as an act of preservation. As historian Herbert Butterfield writes, “There are times when we can never meet the future with sufficient elasticity of mind, especially if we are locked in the contemporary systems of thought. We can do worse than remember a principle which both gives us a firm Rock and leaves us the maximum elasticity for our minds: the principle: Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted.”²⁷

John A. T. Robinson speaks for many when he writes, “I have never really doubted the fundamental truth of the Christian faith—though I have constantly found myself questioning its expression.”²⁸ This is precisely the difficult work the Church is called to today and in every generation: to renew and refresh the Christian understanding of God in a manner which corresponds to its contemporary context, while somehow

²⁷ Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 146.

²⁸ Robinson, *Honest to God*, 27.

remaining rooted in the essential biblical message and honoring the ancient traditions of the faith. Obviously, this is not easy work, yet we cannot ignore it. For the sake of the Church, the Christian faith, and those who will follow us, we must press into new understandings and articulations of who the Christian trinitarian God is for us today.

Though difficult, this is not novel work, as Father Keating so elegantly writes:

The Church has always been faced with the task of integrating the knowledge and experience of each successive age into its inherited body of doctrine and practice. . . . The ability to respond to the signs of the times in a prompt and inspired manner and the ability to absorb and integrate the genuine human values of every culture are charisms that the Church must cultivate if it is to appeal to the hearts and minds of the emerging global society.”²⁹

There have been historic points in time of great transformation and reshaping of the Christian faith: Paul taking the Gospel to the Gentiles and reinterpreting the need for circumcision; The Council of Chalcedon (which established the nature of Christ as fully God and fully man, yet one person); the rise of monasticism; the Great Schism; the Reformation and Counter-Reformation; the rise Pentecostalism in the early twentieth century—all these historical events influenced and shaped the faith we have received. As author and lecturer Phyllis Tickle writes, “about every five hundred years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at the time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.”³⁰ It seem evident the Church is presently on the cusp of another such transformation.

²⁹ Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer*, (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2015), 157.

³⁰ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 157, Kindle.

It is to this task that we now turn: Who, then, is the biblical God to whom we Christians pray? Christians practice a “profession,” not unlike, in some ways, the “professions” of medicine or law. A Christian “practices,” as best they can, that which they profess. Thus, it naturally follows that if one’s profession is altered or expanded, one’s practice of that profession will change accordingly. Conversely, if one’s practice changes, it is almost certain that there has been a corresponding change in one’s profession, conscious or unconsciously. As Bishop Spong writes, “More than anything else, our prayers define our understanding of God. Therefore, to talk about prayer, we must define who the God is to whom we pray. To say it differently, ‘Who do we think is listening?’”³¹ In the remainder of this chapter, we will explore a view of God which I believe is faithful to the testimony of scripture and the historical community of faith, a view known as Panentheism.

A Case for All-In-God

St. Luke records that when Paul was speaking to the religious, though pagan, Athenians, he tells them “God gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.”³² To underscore his point, Paul then uses the words of their own secular poets to affirm (rather than correct) their intuitive understanding of the nature of God, “[God] is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’”³³ In these few verses, Paul asserts the sustaining power of God (in whom we live and move) and God’s imminence (God is

³¹ John Shelby Spong, “Spong on Prayer,” *Find and Ye Shall Seek*, June 2, 2007, <http://mysticalseeker.blogspot.com/2009/06/spong-on-prayer.html>.

³² Acts 17:25.

³³ Acts 17:27-28.

not far from each one of us). Martin Luther echoes this profound merger of transcendent and immanent theology when he writes,

How can reason tolerate that the divine majesty is so small that it can be substantially present in a grain, on a grain, over a grain, through a grain, within and without . . . entirely in each grain, no matter how numerous these grains may be? And how can reason tolerate that the same majesty is so large that neither this world nor a thousand worlds can encompass it and say ‘behold, there it is’? *Yet, though it can be encompassed nowhere and by no one, God’s divine essence encompasses all things and dwells in all* [emphasis mine].³⁴

Here Luther concisely states a view of God which today some theologians refer to as Panentheism. Pan-en-theism should not be confused nor conflated with Pan-theism.

While Pan-theism identifies God directly with the universe, and vice versa, Pan-en-theism holds all things are in God, yet God is greater than the sum of all things. God is both near and yet also more. Pantheism is neither biblical nor a part of historical Christianity. Panentheism, on the other hand, is supported by both. While Pantheism equates creation with God, Panentheism affirms, literally, that all-is-in-God: “pan” (all), “en” (in), “theism” (God). Unlike Pantheism, Panentheism allows for the transcendence of God, i.e. the mysterious, hidden God beyond our knowing. Yet, Panentheism also affirms the immanence of God within creation and indeed, indwelling our very souls.

Perhaps a new or better word than “Panentheism” will emerge in the future to describe what is meant by this biblical concept. This author would welcome such helpful language and believes its time has come. However, for now the author finds “Panentheism” to be the best word we have available to describe what is meant by the fuller, deeper, richer understanding of “God” as both transcendent and immanent as

³⁴ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 122, Kindle.

described by the biblical and historical Christian tradition. Better still, perhaps in the future we will not need to use such a descriptive word for our theology of God, perhaps we will be able to simply say “God,” and all will share this fuller understanding of God by default. The Church at large and individual Christians would do well to embrace a panentheistic understanding of God as their default understanding of God.

Scriptural testimony undergirding a Panentheistic understanding of God abounds. Perhaps there is no better text than the story of the Burning Bush in which Moses asks God for God’s name. In response, “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM’.”³⁵ The biblical footnote to this seminal text gives an alternate rendering of the Hebrew, “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE.” Indeed, the Hebrew word used in this verse, transliterated in the English as “YHWH,” means simply “to be.” Thus, the name God gives is evidently more verb than noun. God is, literally, “being.” This is wholly different from asserting God is “a Being.” As Paul Tillich writes, “God does not exist. He is being itself beyond essence and existence. Therefore, to argue that God exists is to deny him.”³⁶ Thinking of God as a being in time and space constrains YHWH and makes God finite. Such thinking puts conditions on the Unconditional. God is not *a Being*, to which one can point; rather, as the Gospel of John puts it, “God is spirit”³⁷ (note the lack of an article). Likewise, the renowned Jewish philosopher Martin Buber writes, “the eternal Thou can by its nature not become it; for by its nature it cannot be established in measure and bounds. . . . And yet in accordance with our nature we are continually making the eternal thou into an it, into some thing – making God into a thing.”³⁸

³⁵ Exod 3:14.

³⁶ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 205.

³⁷ John 4:24.

³⁸ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2010), 112.

Another example of this Panentheistic understanding of God may be found in the letter to the Ephesians which underscores the oneness of all in God. “Take every care to preserve the unity of the Spirit. . . . There is one Body, one Spirit. . . . There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, *over all, through all and within all*.”³⁹ Likewise the epistle to the Colossians asserts that all things were created in Christ, and “in him all things hold together.”⁴⁰ In Paul’s letter to the Romans we find a liturgical doxology, used by the early church, which mysteriously proclaims “*all things are from, through and to God*.”⁴¹ While more texts could be cited, biblical language throughout Scripture points to a vast and deep Panentheistic understanding of God as both immanent and transcendent. Such language does not paint a picture of an aloof Bearded-Old-Man-in-the-Sky. Rather, these passages and many others point us toward an all-encompassing presence of God who permeates creation and transcends our understanding.

For theologians such as Tillich, God, therefore, is not the highest Being of all beings, which would essentially be Supernatural Theism. Rather, God is, in Tillich’s words, “The Ground of Being.”⁴² Tillich claims we cannot make any literal statements about God, since any attempt at defining God objectifies YHWH and slides toward anthropomorphism. This is one reason neither male nor female pronouns are appropriate for God: YHWH is not a person. C. S. Lewis agrees with this view when he writes the only claim we can make about God is “continually murmuring ‘Not thus, not thus, neither is this Thou.’”⁴³ Thus, all language about God is symbolic. This symbolic language is

³⁹ Eph. 4:3-6, NJB. Since the Bible does not use italics, all italicized scripture is the author’s emphasis.

⁴⁰ Col 1:17.

⁴¹ Acts 11:36.

⁴² Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, (Oxford: University Press, 1964), 15.

⁴³ C. S. Lewis, “Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer,” A Project Gutenberg Canada eBook, August 13, 2016, <https://gutenberg.ca/ebooks/lewiscs-letterstomalcolm/lewiscs-letterstomalcolm-00-h.html#chapter04>.

not sacred but rather points us to the Sacred and enables us to participate in the power and presence of YHWH. Tillich writes, God “is supposed to be beyond the ontological elements and categories which constitute reality. But every statement subjects [God] to them. [God] is seen as a self which has a world, as an ego which relates to a thought, as a cause which is separated from its effect, as having a definite space and endless time. God is [seen as] a being, not being-itself.”⁴⁴ Tillich does not see himself as tearing down orthodox faith, but rather defending it. The God above the god of Supernatural Theism “has been misunderstood as a dogmatic statement of a pantheistic or mystical character. First of all, it is not a dogmatic, but an apologetic, statement. It takes seriously the radical doubt experienced by many people.”⁴⁵

Likewise, John A. T. Robinson spoke of God as “Ultimate Reality,” while William James refers to YHWH as the “More.” Bonhoeffer writes, “God is beyond in the midst of our life.”⁴⁶ They were all attempting to use language for God that embraced, paradoxically, both God’s immanence (presence) and transcendence (other-ness). Robinson writes how transformative one of Tillich’s sermons⁴⁷ was in this regard, saying that the words of Tillich’s sermon “speak of God with a new and indestructible relevance and made the traditional language of a God that came in from the outside both remote and artificial.”⁴⁸ Thus, Panentheism offers a broader, deeper and more faithful biblical understanding of God than the commonly held concepts of Supernatural Theism. Perhaps for reasons such as this, Robinson writes, “For my own part, the sense of

⁴⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 184.

⁴⁵ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 12.

⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 282.

⁴⁷ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, (England: Pelican, 1962), 62-64.

⁴⁸ Robinson, *Honest to God*, 22.

spiritual relief which comes from rejecting the idea of God as a supernatural being is enormous.”⁴⁹

A Sacramental Understanding of the World

Panenthism promotes a sacramental view of the world. At its most basic level, sacramental theology affirms that God reveals grace to the world’s inhabitants through creation itself; or, to put it another way, the grace of God exudes from the ordinary. Christian monks and nuns during the middle ages, sometimes known as mystics, have led the way in grasping this truth, thus modeling sacramental living. Julian of Norwich proclaims, “The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything.”⁵⁰ Likewise Teresa of Avila writes of finding God’s presence in the midst of her menial work: “Don’t think that if you had a great deal of time you would spend more of it in prayer. Get rid of that idea! God gives more in a moment than in a long period of time, for [God’s] actions are not measured by time at all. Know that even when you are in the kitchen, Our Lord is moving among the pots and pans.”⁵¹ Brother Lawrence, an uneducated and low-ranking seventeenth-century monk became renowned for his ability to “practice the presence of God” while peeling potatoes in the monastery kitchen. “That we might accustom ourselves to a continual conversation with Him, with freedom and in simplicity. That we need only to recognize God intimately present with us, to address ourselves to God every moment.”⁵² Thus, “what the mystics seem to grasp almost intuitively is that God is not a

⁴⁹ Robinson, *Honest to God*, 41.

⁵⁰ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2011), 68, Kindle.

⁵¹ Though this well-known quote is widely attributed to Teresa of Avila, the author could not find a credible source for it. It may be apocryphal.

⁵² Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Westwood, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1958), 24.

Being external to life that we must woo and flatter to gain divine protection . . . and a stake in eternity.”⁵³ Rather, mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Avila, Brother Lawrence, and Julian of Norwich, understood God as both imminent in their daily lives and as mysteriously transcendent beyond all knowing.

Sacramental theology runs counter to some Christian theologies which understand the world as profane and fallen, and therefore must be eschewed as much as possible. From such a theological viewpoint salvation primarily means “going to heaven” when one dies. To put it another way, salvation is chiefly concerned with the afterlife rather than the present. This life is viewed as a testing time which prepares the faithful for the heavenly realms. Such a theological view springs from a premillennial theology which, in the words of one writer purports “a new and better age will not be inaugurated until the Second Coming of Christ, who is the only one capable of cleaning up the mess. No amount of human effort can hasten that day, or ultimately save a doomed world.”⁵⁴ Thus, such theology may promote a sectarian and insular lifestyle that, rather than finding the sacred in the midst of the world, advocates forsaking the world for the sake of personal holiness and salvation.

Theologians such as Teilhard de Charden reject such thinking, writing, “By virtue of the Creation, and still more the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see.”⁵⁵ A sacramental theology understands that because God is “in, with and under”⁵⁶ all things; grace and nature are not in opposition. Grace is the

⁵³ Spong, *Eternal Life*, 170, Kindle.

⁵⁴ Michael Gerson, “Trump and the Evangelical Temptation,” *The Atlantic*, April 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/04/the-last-temptation/554066/>.

⁵⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 30.

⁵⁶ This was Martin Luther’s phrase to describe the presence of Christ in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 37: “Word and Sacrament III,” eds. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 306.

fulfillment and liberation of creation.⁵⁷ Rather than tamping down “the flesh” and attempting to separate from the material world (as some forms of Gnosticism and other religions are wont to do), the Judeo-Christian tradition has a rich and enduring legacy of celebrating the physical world in all its pain, messiness, and beauty, embracing all of it as a part of the great *Heilsgeschichte*.⁵⁸

Thus, in a vision Isaiah proclaims, “the whole Earth is full of God’s glory.” The Psalmist asks rhetorically where one could possibly go to flee the presence of God?⁵⁹ Jesus proclaims to the religious leaders that the Kingdom of God is, in fact, not far off but rather “in your midst,” and that when you have served one of the “least of these” you have served me. Mountains and fields burst forth into song while trees clap their hands, and all the “heavens declare the glory of God; the skies declare God’s craftsmanship.”⁶⁰ Jesus notes that stones along the road might suddenly “burst into cheers,” and Paul speaks of creation itself groaning for its redemption. Jesus used mud to restore a blindman’s eyesight and turned ordinary water into premium wine for a wedding party. He was baptized with river-water and blessed common bread, telling his disciples to eat it as his body.⁶¹ Indeed, Paul writes “God’s eternal power and divine nature” are understood and clearly seen through creation.⁶² The scriptures team with testimony of the panentheistic presence of God permeating the Earth and all of creation, if we have the eyes to see. As one Catholic priest writes: “A sacramental perspective is one that ‘sees’ the divine in the human, the infinite in the finite, the spiritual in the material, the

⁵⁷ Rom 8:21.

⁵⁸ A German word which means, literally, “Healing Story.”

⁵⁹ Isa 6:3, Ps 139:7-10.

⁶⁰ Luke 17:21 (KJV), Isa 55:12, Ps 19:1.

⁶¹ Luke 19:40 (NLT), Rom 8:22, Jn 9:6, Mark 1:9, Matt 26:26.

⁶² Rom. 1:20.

transcendent in the immanent, the eternal in the historical. . . . Therefore, all reality is sacred.”⁶³ Or, as Brother Lawrence puts it, “It is not necessary for being with God to be always at church.”⁶⁴

God as Beyond Personal

One might reasonably ask, “How do you pray to a God who is both imminent and transcendent?” How do you have a personal relationship with “The Ground of Being,” or “Ultimate Reality”? Indeed, this has been a criticism and a sticking point for some Christians who readily acknowledge the deficiencies of viewing God through the lens of Supernatural Theism, yet may be reluctant to embrace a Panentheistic understanding of God. Thus, Roger Olson, a self-described evangelical blogger, writes:

One reason I resist thinking of God as Being Itself as opposed to a personal being is that it tends to undermine prayer except as meditation. . . . If God is Being Itself, the Absolute, Unconditioned, then it would seem prayer cannot affect God. In fact, it would seem God cannot be affected by anything outside himself. My early Christian faith, which I have not entirely discarded (!), focused much on a “personal relationship with God.” God is someone, a being, who is other than I, and we stand vis-a-vis one another in what Buber and Brunner called an “I-Thou relationship.” Regarding God as Being Itself tends to lead away from relating to God as “Thou” with whom one can have a real, personal relationship.”⁶⁵

Certainly, conceptualizing God in new ways can feel unsettling and may indeed require us to shed aspects of our “early Christian faith.” To put the issue another way, can we have a “personal” relationship with God if God is not a person, not even “a Being,” but is “Being” itself? Such a question may be based on a binary assumption that

⁶³ Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994), 9-10.

⁶⁴ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 50.

⁶⁵ Roger E. Olson, “Is God ‘A Being’ Or ‘Being Itself’?”, Patheos, May 16, 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2015/05/is-god-a-being-or-being-itself/>.

if something is not personal, then it must be impersonal. With God, however, new (or perhaps very ancient) concepts and language must be employed. In prayer, the Lord said to Julian of Norwich, “I am the ground of your beseeching.”⁶⁶ How similar is this to Tillich’s “Ground of Being”? Spong writes that he understands God in “non-personal” ways. He goes on to explain, “Please note that *non*-personal does not mean *impersonal*. It means that the holy cannot be bound by the personal. ‘Personal’ is a human category.”⁶⁷

One might claim, “I am a person! The only relationship I am capable of having with other living beings is a personal one.” Yet God is not “a living being,” God is the Ground of all Being, or in the words of Bonhoeffer, “God is beyond in the midst of our life.”⁶⁸ And yet we can have an intimate relationship with God, even though God is a non-being. Thomas Keating, a Roman Catholic monk, perhaps states it best when he writes in his well-known book, *Intimacy with God*, “These paradoxes point to the fact that God is beyond all that exists as well as in all that exists, or more exactly, God is beyond all categories of being and non-being.”⁶⁹ Yet by the very title of Keating’s book, it is clear Keating believes one may both know and experience God *intimately*. As Marjorie Thompson writes, “Christian spirituality is thus initiated and sustained by One who lives both within and beyond us. This means that while God chooses to be known to us in and through personal experience, the divine Being always transcends personal experience.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Norwich, *Revelations of Diving Love*, 81, Kindle.

⁶⁷ Spong, *Eternal Life*, 160.

⁶⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letter and Papers from Prison*, 282.

⁶⁹ Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer*, ix.

⁷⁰ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, 8.

Although God is not a person, there is a personal quality to God's essence. Scripture reveals one of the qualities of God is love. Thus, John states plainly, "God is love."⁷¹ In other words, love has God as its ground and source. Indeed, Christianity professes the divine revelation of God is found in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus we see the love of God made known in his compassion for people, (especially the poor, the ill, and the disenfranchised) and in his passion for the Kingdom of God on earth. This divine *agape* is what Paul means when he speaks of being "in Christ," to dwell deeply in the divine love of God.⁷² Thus, Jesus prays that we may be "one" just as he and the Father are one, "I in them and you in me."⁷³ Thus, we might use the term "transpersonal" when describing our relationship with God—it is deeper and more profound than any personal relationship could ever hope to be. Likewise, Tillich writes that when we pray, we do something humanly impossible. Referring to Romans 8:26, he notes, "we talk to somebody who is not somebody else, but who is nearer to us than we ourselves are. We address somebody who can never become an object of our address because 'he' is always subject, always acting, always creating."⁷⁴

Thus, God is beyond my imagination and language capacity, yet God is here, at my fingertips, closer to me than my own breath. In this regard, Panenthism seems wholly consistent with the testimony of the breadth of Scripture and the affirmation of God as "spirit." The neo-orthodox theologian, Karl Barth, who is credited by some with saving the orthodox faith from its slide into liberal thinking and influence, was celebrated for his

⁷¹ 1 John 4:8.

⁷² This is the converse of contemporary evangelical language which speaks of inviting Jesus "into our heart."

⁷³ John 17:23.

⁷⁴ Paul Tillich, "The Paradox of Prayer," *Audio Enlightenment: Giving Voice to the Wisdom of Ages*, 2010, <http://www.audioenlightenment.com/the-paradox-of-prayer-paul-tillich>.

portrayal of God as “Wholly Other.” Though Barth certainly made many important contributions to twentieth-century thought and theology, this truncated view of God emphasizes YHWH’s transcendence over against God’s immanence with and in creation. Arguably, a Panentheistic view of God is more balanced, personable and approachable than a God who is “Wholly Other.”

Perhaps this trans-personal mystery of God in us, and us in God, is what Paul is referring to when he writes, “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.”⁷⁵ St. Augustine called this *Capax Dei*, our “capacity for God.” Though we cannot have a strictly “personal” relationship with the “I Am,” we do, according to the Scriptures and the Church fathers, have a capacity for YHWH. So, Paul prays for the Church in Ephesus that God may strengthen them with “power through the Spirit” in their “inner being,” that they may “be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”⁷⁶ Here St. Paul is desiring the Ephesians have something beyond a personal relationship with God: that they will experience God in ways that are profound and indescribable. Perhaps this is precisely why music has always played such a large part in the Church. Our experience of God goes beyond the mere personal to the “ineffably sublime.” At such moments, words fail us, only music can come close to expressing such categories of unutterable experience.

Clement of Alexandria wrote, “God contains everything and is contained by nothing.”⁷⁷ Panentheism is not a modern or postmodern way of thinking about God,

⁷⁵ 2 Cor 3:17-18.

⁷⁶ Eph 3:16, 19.

⁷⁷ Johanna Louisa van den Hoek, *Clement of Alexandria and His Use of Philo in the Stromateis: An Early Christian Reshaping of a Jewish Model* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 1988), 170.

rather it is ancient. When we let go of the notion that the word “God” refers to a Supernatural Being who may or may not exist, but instead refers to a numinous, radiant, glorious dimension of reality that we may *know*, and that draws from us the awe-filled explanation, “O, My God,” than the whole question of God becomes completely different. The question changes from, “Does God exist?” to “What is this meaning that surrounds, underpins, and fills our lives, that each of us experiences intuitively, that causes modern secular people to confess, ‘I’m spiritual, but not religious’”? This author agrees with Moses, St. Paul, the church fathers, medieval mystics, Bonhoeffer, Tillich, Robinson, Borg, and others who assert that God is not simply the material space and time of matter and energy, but is the glorious, radiant, Mystery before which our words can only stumble and stammer. Given this broader understanding of God, the Christian life becomes about centering more and more deeply in the One in Whom we live and move and have our being.⁷⁸ And so, it is to this practice of centering our lives in God in prayer that we now turn.

⁷⁸ Acts 17:28.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONTOURS OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER

It is not enough to leave the essence of religion, namely a meaning for prayer, unthought out.

—Matthew Fox, *Prayer: A Radical Response to Life*

Every person, whether they know it or not, has a theology. We all use words (Greek: *logy*) when talking or thinking about God (*theo*). Not all of us are able to easily articulate our understanding of God, but the words we use for God, and the way we think about YHWH reveal our theology, that is, what we believe. In the last chapter we discussed how having a fuller and deeper understanding of who God is, in keeping with the breadth of biblical testimony and early Christian tradition, allows us to recognize God as both beyond that which we can imagine, and yet also as imminent, closer to us than our own breath. God is both the *Emmanuel* and the *More*. This dialectical conception of God as both imminent and transcendent will directly influence the method, motive and content of our prayers. Put simply, we pray as we believe.

In this chapter we will address some practical and fundamental questions surrounding prayer: What is prayer, why do we do it, and how do we do it? These questions may seem simple and rather basic; they are questions to which any Sunday school child might readily give an answer. Yet as mature, adult Christians and disciples, we are called to reflect deeply on our faith and practices. Sadly, many Christians never grow or mature in either their theology or practice of prayer. Instead, they are content

with babies' "milk" rather than progressing to "solid food,"¹ thus they continue to think and act as children rather than as adults.² As discussed in the last chapter, many of us still pray as we did when we were nine years old. However, if we enlarge our understanding of God and prayer, we will begin to better recognize ourselves as beings created to reflect the divine image of God, and that our opportunity for transformation is found in the God-given gift of life itself. Roberta Bondi writes, "I have learned to think about prayer and to pray from a very different and much wider perspective than I was ever accustomed to, and in the process I have discovered that prayer is broader, more inclusive, more painful, and more transforming than I had thought."³ We will now turn to reflect more deeply on the practice of Christian prayer.

It is often helpful when thinking about the contours of something to consider first what it is not. Therefore, we will use as our framework two common assumptions regarding prayer which should be re-examined: (1) Prayer is primarily a daily practice, and (2) Prayer is not primarily asking for things. To be clear, prayer can be both practiced daily and petitionary in nature; yet, prayer should be thought of as much more than *just* a daily practice, and as much more than *just* asking God for things. When prayer is limited practically and/or conceptually to a daily practice in which we ask God for things, it will almost certainly become perverted and unhealthy. Within each section of this chapter, therefore, a fuller understanding of the breadth and depth of Christian prayer is offered. Leaders and lay people alike may find this discussion helpful and

¹ Heb. 5:12; 1 Cor 3:2.

² 1 Cor. 13:11

³ Roberta C. Bondi, *To Pray & to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 11-12.

empowering as we reimagine, perhaps for the first time for many, what prayer is and is not.

The purpose of this project is to reform and expand people's understanding and practice of prayer via a six-week, congregational-based program. To restate our thesis: *Given a broader, biblical, and ancient understanding of what prayer is (and is not), church leaders can help reform and expand people's understanding and practice of Christian prayer, enabling people to enjoy the sacred practice of prayer in new and meaningful ways.* Whenever we are connecting in meaningful, life-giving ways with God, others, the world, or even ourselves, we are practicing a form of prayer. The most fundamental motive and purpose of prayer is to connect to God who is both beyond us, yet also, paradoxically, deep within us. Put simply, we pray to connect.

This is potentially very good, even salvific news to a world starved for meaningful connection and relationships. Deep down we all have a desire for intimacy, to know and be known. We all long to belong, to be a part of something of meaning which is larger than ourselves. Yet, despite all our technology, we are as lonely and isolated as ever. Loneliness in Western culture (and perhaps Eastern as well?) is so acute and prevalent, the United Kingdom's Prime Minister recently appointed a new governmental position: a "Minister for Loneliness."⁴ A recent study found that loneliness is worse for our health than smoking fifteen cigarettes a day and is associated with "a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, and depression and anxiety."⁵ Sadly, much of the Church's traditional teaching on prayer may serve to further alienate us,

⁴ Ceylan Yeginsu, "U.K. Appoints a Minister for Loneliness," *New York Times*, January 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/world/europe/uk-britain-loneliness.html>.

⁵ Yeginsu, "U.K. Appoints a Minister for Loneliness."

leaving us with a sense of guilt and shame, thus isolating us even more. It is the author's hope that through this study, churches and the individual reader might be offered an opportunity to rethink (*metanoia*) some of our basic assumptions about prayer and gain a new understanding of the healing beauty and depth which may be found within Christian prayer.

Re-Examining “Daily Devotions”

It is important to acknowledge there are many people who practice daily prayer and benefit from it. There is certainly nothing wrong with having a daily routine or a discipline if it nourishes one's soul. No doubt there are many Christians who have a propensity for the practice and find such time fruitful and meaningful. However, we as leaders in the Church must realize this is the exception rather than the norm among our people. There are likely many more who struggle with the practice of daily prayer and have never come to terms with it; in that camp, I must pitch my tent. Indeed, if one saw the number of theological books and devotionals on prayer I have on my library shelves, they might assume I had a flourishing and robust practice of daily prayer and devotion. The truth is far different. For many years I felt like a failure in this regard. It was not for lack of effort; I tried many strategies, read countless books, went on prayer retreats, and consulted with other Christians, most who gave me encouragement that, although affirming, was not very helpful. Sadly, I was left feeling a failure at what I believed to be a fundamental aspect of Christian discipleship. I feared I was missing out on an important aspect of spiritual growth. I now resonate with Robinson's words, “the experts have induced in us a deep inferiority complex. They tell us that this is the way we ought

to pray, and yet we find that we cannot maintain ourselves for any length of time even on the lowest rungs of the ladder, let alone climb it.”⁶ In such a study as this, we must ask the question, “Is prayer really meant to be something Christians do for twenty minutes a day in private?”, or is it possible the entire premise is misguided? To address these questions, it will be helpful to reflect on how the expectation of prayer and devotions as a daily discipline came about in the first place.

To understand the Christian evangelical idea of “daily devotions” we must go back to the third-century emergence of the “Desert Fathers and Mothers.” With the growth and acceptance of Christianity as a bona fide religion, Christian martyrdom began to wane. Voluntarily choosing to live in the austere environment of the desert, often in solitude, was viewed as a way to “devote” one’s entire life to God. The practice morphed and continued into the Middle Ages. Monks, friars and nuns formed monasteries, abbeys, cloisters and convents across Europe. They developed an elaborate system of daily prayers and worship in an effort to center their communal lives upon God. Such people were called “the religious” and were looked upon, like the priests, as being more holy and closer to God than ordinary people, most of whom scraped out a living as illiterate peasants. Certainly, these godly “religious” men and women contributed much to the preservation, theology, and practice of Christianity through several centuries, to include the “Dark Ages.”⁷

With the Reformation came the revolutionary idea of “The Priesthood of All Believers.” For example, Martin Luther instructed parents to take on the role of teaching

⁶ John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), 93.

⁷ For examples, see Thomas Cahill’s book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland’s Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe*, (New York: Anchor Publishing, 1996).

the Christian faith to their children, writing, “Every father of a family is a bishop in his house and the wife a bishopess.”⁸ Now all Christians were placed on spiritual-parity with the “religious” and were encouraged by the reformers to exercise their newly-empowered faith. Concurrently, the Bible, translated in the people’s vernacular tongue, was becoming more accessible, thanks to the invention of the printing press. Scripture-reading and prayers could be practiced within the household. Pietism was born. Lutherans, Calvinists, Reformed, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, Brethren, and many other expressions of Protestantism all commended daily Bible reading and prayer for the laity. Such practices were no longer reserved for the religious orders, now they could be exercised by all Christians, though in an abbreviated form.

Given this cursory overview, one can see how the presumption, or better said, the privilege of the practice of daily Bible reading and prayer came to be deeply appreciated and prized within Protestant Christianity. Indeed, it is no wonder that today, we still think of a person who prays and reads their Bible daily as a “good” Christian.

One can find countless examples of many contemporary Christians leaders and books who assume the need for a structured, daily prayer practice in order to grow in one’s faith. Do a quick internet search of the question, “Do I need to have a daily devotion?” and scores of websites will appear extolling the necessity of a daily quiet-time while offering tips and techniques. As one states, “In their daily devotions, Christians seek to draw close to God’s heart, understand more about Him, obey His commands, and hold on to His promises. *The impure and double-minded will have no such yearning in their hearts.* In fact, they will seek to separate themselves from God as much as

⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism*, translated by Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 10.

possible” (emphasis mine).⁹ From this passage, one might conclude that if he or she does not have a “yearning” for daily prayer, it may be an indication they are “impure and double-minded.”

Even mainline Christian authors succumb to such thinking. Marjorie Thompson, a Presbyterian pastor, writes, “It would be nice if we could simply ‘practice the presence of God’ in all of life, without expending energy on particular exercises. But the capacity to remember and abide in God’s presence comes only through steady training.”¹⁰ Here I would take issue with Thompson. While I agree a capacity to abide in God’s presence may come with practice, this advice runs counter to the testimony of both Scripture and the faithful who have gone before us. Turning prayer into an exercise can result in a routine that is driven by our agenda, our needs, our desires, and our perfection. As Fox states, what can be lamentable in disciplined daily devotions, is “an attitude of considering prayer as personal or institutional calisthenics or spiritual muscle-building.”¹¹ While a practice of daily prayer is helpful for some and a natural and genuine part of their life, for others such a practice is experienced as forced and contrived. Robinson warns such practices “may be the path to disillusionment.” He goes on to write, “Indeed, I believe this is why countless people give up praying. They set aside the spaces religiously, and they become emptier and emptier.”¹² There is certainly nothing wrong with having a practice of daily prayer if one desires it, but we should be clear that the term “daily devotion” is, in fact, extracanonical. Encouraging or insisting that a person

⁹ GotQuestions.org, “Is it Important for Christians to Have a Daily Devotion?” accessed January 29, 2018, <https://www.gotquestions.org/daily-devotions.html>.

¹⁰ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 11.

¹¹ Matthew Fox, *Prayer: A Radical Response to Life*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2001), 8.

¹² Robinson, *Honest to God*, 102-103.

should have a daily private time of prayer in order to be a faithful Christian will almost certainly harm rather than nurture a person's spirit. Rather, what is needed is for Christian leaders to both practice and teach an entirely new approach to prayer.

Organic Prayer

The Scriptures nowhere command or even commend the practice of a set-aside time of daily prayer. Of course, neither could they commend daily Bible reading since Bibles, as we know them today, did not exist. Rather, the Hebrew practice of spirituality was weaved into living life itself. God was not understood as “out there,” to be called upon privately at a certain time of day. Rather, God was found in the daily struggles and joys of living life itself. Thus, the Psalmist writes in awe, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are mortals that you are mindful of them?”¹³ For the Hebrew people, to have faith was not some mental activity like believing or saying prayers, “it was, rather, to possess the ability to enter life expectantly, confident that God was there to be found.”¹⁴ Prayer was not a mental practice for Hebrews, rather the reality of God was experienced as a part of their daily lives. This philosophy of God fully present in the world is captured in the Hebrew drinking toast, “*L’Chaim!*”, which means simply, “To life!” Expressions of devotion were a natural outpouring of their faith, “as the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”¹⁵ And again the Psalmist writes, “On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the

¹³ Psalm 8:3-4.

¹⁴ John Shelby Spong, *Honest Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 2000), 23.

¹⁵ Ps 42:1-2.

watches of the night,”¹⁶ Prayer was practiced by the Hebrew people, but nowhere is it presented as a daily discipline. It was instead woven into the very fabric of their everyday lives and experiences.

Likewise, rather than people using prayer as a means to seek and find God, we read story after story in the Scriptures of God coming to people and empowering them for a mission, often against their will and/or to the surprise of others. The stories of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Jonah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Mary, Jesus, Peter, and Paul all can be cited as examples. I was once at a conference where the speaker, Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber,¹⁷ was asked during an audience “Q & A” what devotional practices she used to “deepen her walk with God.” Pastor Nadia, who has a reputation of being frank and unconventional, replied to the gathered audience of about six-hundred people, “What?! Why would I want that? Most of the time I wish God would leave me the hell alone!” Such a response may at first blush seem offensive or even blasphemous, but it reveals a deeper, biblical truth about our relationship with God: our prayers are the fruit of a relationship in which God first finds us rather than vice-versa. If we are working at prayer, the biblical testimony suggests something may be wrong. It is the Hound of Heaven who is pursuing us, not the other way around.

Structured communal prayers did arise within the establishment of the Jewish religion and synagogues. Yet, Jesus himself warns against wordy prayers and set formulas. As Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of Jesus’ cautionary words on prayer read, “The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They’re full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from

¹⁶ Ps 63:6.

¹⁷ Author of *Pastrix* and *Accidental Saints*.

God. Don't fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need."¹⁸ In this same passage, Jesus says, "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."¹⁹ Note the reason Jesus tells people to pray in a room with the door shut is not because people need to withdraw from the world in order to pray, as if somehow that would make our prayers more effectual. Rather, the reason Jesus instructs us to pray in private is because some "hypocrites" were praying in public view solely to draw attention to themselves. In other words, Jesus is saying, do not flaunt your prayers in order to impress people (a message that has immediate relevance for those who offer public and corporate prayers today), better to pray them in private.

Some note that Jesus himself practiced a "quiet time" when he went off by himself to pray. There are instances when Jesus intentionally went to a "lonely" place to pray.²⁰ These times, however, seemed to be at the impulse of natural desire and need rather than as any sort of structured discipline. They are presented as intermittent rather than daily. We do not know the content or structure of Jesus' time away in prayer. They are often precipitated by high-demand, public activity with throngs of people pressing in on Jesus. Scripture does not tell us if Jesus' prayer-time consisted of words, silent meditation, or if Jesus was simply "resting" in God during these times of "prayer."

Paul's understanding and practice of prayer also seems more organic than disciplined. From a prison cell he writes, "I thank my God every time I remember you,

¹⁸ Matt 6:7-8 (The Message).

¹⁹ Matt 6:6 (NIV).

²⁰ Luke 4:42; 5:16; 6:12; 9:28.

constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you.”²¹ There is nothing to indicate in this epistle or any other that prayer was anything but a natural outpouring for Paul. In another letter, Paul instructs the community of believers to “Pray without ceasing” and not to “quench the Spirit.”²² Obviously, a “daily prayer time” would constrain rather than fulfill such a mandate. These three words, “pray without ceasing,” perhaps more than any other in all of Scripture, reveal the nature of prayer as constant, raw, and spontaneous, paralleling the sentiments of the Psalmist.

The early church fathers also embraced this understanding of organic prayer. Origen writes that life is “one great continuous prayer.”²³ Augustine concurs that “there is an interior prayer without ceasing,” while the desert Father St. Macarius said, “There is no other perfect meditation than the saving and blessed name of our Lord Jesus Christ dwelling without interruption in you.”²⁴ This practice was mirrored in the Eastern Church, where prayer was the “constant practice and occupation, the invoking of his holy and most sweet Name, bearing it always in the mind, in the heart and on the lips.”²⁵ In the monastic tradition of the West, the “Prayer of the Heart” was a specific term used to indicate a type of continual prayer practice which promoted “keeping oneself in the presence of God and of reality, rooted in one’s own inner truth.”²⁶ “Prayer of the Heart” was not a daily prayer practiced at a specific time and place, rather it was prayer offered continually throughout the day.

²¹ Phil 1:3-4.

²² 1 Thess 5:17-19.

²³ Adam Matthew, *The Indian Female Evangelist* (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2010), 20.

²⁴ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 4.

²⁵ E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer, *Writing from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), 172-173.

²⁶ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 23.

Some Reformers shunned set times and prescriptions for prayer as practiced by the Roman Catholic monks and nuns of that day. Luther warned against “blabbering” and making many words, “reciting prayers as parrots.” Reflecting on his days as a monastic when he prayed mindlessly just to get through the required daily prayers, Luther writes, “I myself prayed these canonical hours many a time in such a way that the psalms or the hour was over before I was conscious whether I was at the beginning or the middle. . . . one has not prayed well when he forgets what he has said.”²⁷ Rather than offering wordy prayers to God, it seems words themselves are optional in prayer. As Tillich states:

Words, created by and used in our conscious life, are not the essence of prayer. The essence of prayer is the act of God who is working in us and raises our whole being to Himself. The way in which this happens is called by Paul “sighing.” Sighing is an expression of the weakness of our creaturely existence. Only in terms of wordless sighs can we approach God, and even these sighs are His work in us.²⁸

This might help us to make sense of Dan Rather’s curious interview of Mother Teresa when he asked her, “What is it that you say to God when you pray?” Mother Teresa answered, “I don’t say anything, I just listen.” Rather paused and then asked, “What, then, does God say to you?” Mother Teresa paused and replied thoughtfully, “He listens, too.”²⁹ Fox sums up this thinking when he writes, “We can only conclude that prayer’s primary meaning cannot be conversation with God but concerns the presence, the medium, the field of prayer where we ‘live, move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28) in a

²⁷ Martin Luther, “A Simple Way to Pray: For Master Peter, the Barber,” *Minister's Prayer Book: An Order of Prayer and Readings*, John W. Doberstein, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 445.

²⁸ Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 138.

²⁹ Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides and Elizabeth H. Prodromou, eds., *Eastern Orthodox Christianity and American Higher Education: Theological, Historical, and Contemporary Reflections*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 106.

God who is ‘over all, works through all, and is in all,’ a ‘being rooted and grounded in love’ (Eph. 3:17) who is God.”³⁰

One of the most beloved books on prayer is Brother Lawrence’s *The Practice of the Presence of God*. This small book is a collection of conversations and letters by Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth-century Carmelite monk in France, which were preserved and later published. Brother Lawrence believed we could “accustom ourselves to a continual conversation with God, with freedom and in simplicity. That we need only to recognize God intimately present with us, to address ourselves to Him every moment.”³¹ There was no difference between work and prayer for Brother Lawrence. Thus, he writes, “The time of business . . . does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament.”³² Being a part of a monastic order, Brother Lawrence was required to leave his work and pray at certain times of the day at the direction of his superior. Yet, “he did not want such retirement, nor ask for it, because his greatest business did not divert him from God,”³³ Indeed, Brother Lawrence claimed, “he was more united with God in his outward employments than when he left them for devotion and retirement.”³⁴ Thus, Brother Lawrence quit all forms of devotion and prayers except “those to which my state obliges me.” He believed without love, the disciplines of prayer, penances, and exercises were pointless. Rather, “our sanctification did not

³⁰ Fox, *Prayer*, 17.

³¹ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1958), 24.

³² Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 31.

³³ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 19.

³⁴ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 23.

depend upon changing or adding to our works, but in *doing that for God's sake which we commonly do for our own*" (emphasis mine).³⁵ For Brother Lawrence, prayer was not a discipline, but rather took the form of a deep, abiding love and union with God.

All of this is most remarkable considering Brother Lawrence's status. He was not a great spiritual leader, he was not even a priest; rather he was a lowly "lay-brother" who worked in the monastery kitchen. He died in 1691 in obscurity. Yet his teachings on prayer and intimacy with God, compiled by an unknown biographer, have grown in influence as they have resonated with Christians around the world for centuries. A poem attributed to Brother Lawrence, known as his "Kitchen Prayer," sums up his theology of prayer nicely:

Lord of all pots and pans and things,
since I've no time to be a great saint
by doing lovely things,
or watching late with Thee,
or dreaming in the dawn's light,
or storming heaven's gates,
make me a saint by getting meals,
and washing up the plates.
Warm all the kitchen with Thy Love,
and light it with Thy peace;
forgive me all my worrying,
and make my grumbling cease.
Thou who didst love to give men food,
in room, or by the sea,
accept the service that I do,
I do it unto Thee.³⁶

Such prayer corresponds with Jesus' teaching on "abiding," found throughout the Gospel of John. "Abide" is a word we no longer use in contemporary conversation. This

³⁵ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, 25.

³⁶ Alex A. Gondola, *Come as You Are: Sermons on the Lord's Supper* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, 2000), 66.

is our loss since it conveys a profound depth of connection with others and with God. Jesus uses the word eight times in just four verses in John 15:4-7. “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.” The Greek word is *meno*, translated as “stay,” “dwell,” “remain” or “abide.” Though it lacks the same depth, the contemporary phrase, “hang out” might be the most accessible translation in our culture for the sense of this biblical word. Jesus invites us to “hang out” with him, to enjoy his presence, to dwell deeply in his company. Jesus taught the loving presence of the Father was accessible through him, “My Father and I will come to you and make our ‘*menoing place*’ in you.”³⁷

This understanding of prayer as abiding with God, and God in us, is compatible with another Greek word, which some of the early church Fathers’ used for prayer: *homilia*. This Greek word mistakenly came to be understood primarily as “talking,” hence the English word “homily,” which now most often refers to a brief sermon. However, the Greek word *homilia* connotes a much broader and deeper meaning than just talking. In its fullest sense, *homilia* means: to be in company with, to come together or live together, to have intercourse with (in a non-sexual sense), to be friends. Thus, when Clement of Alexandria describes prayer as uninterrupted *homilia* with God through knowledge, life and thanksgiving,³⁸ he was not implying we should talk non-stop to God, but rather that we should abide in God’s presence.

These two Greek words, *meno* and *homilia*, both convey a profound and unbroken form of connecting with another, with or without words. This reminds me of those

³⁷ John 14:23, author’s translation.

³⁸ Robert L. Simpson, *The Interpretation of Prayer in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965), 33, 183.

treasured times when I can share a leisurely cup of coffee with a close friend and bask in deep, enriching conversation. This perspective strikes me as very different in both form and flavor from that of a disciplined approach to prayer. Indeed, I'm not sure I would want to have coffee with my friend if she (or I) viewed it as a discipline.

Such a relational understanding of prayer gives us permission to be fully transparent with God. This is demonstrated repeatedly in the Psalms, which portray an intimate and transparent relationship between the Psalmist and God. The Psalms were both the hymnal and prayer-book of the Israelites. We may think of the Psalms as flowery verses filled with heavenly language. However, upon a closer reading, the Psalms reveal a surprising grittiness. As Eugene Peterson notes, many of us grew up hearing the Psalms read in Elizabethan English. "In this language, even the Psalms that aren't nice sounded nice, even when cursing." He goes on to write, "I began to think that I would love to translate the Psalms into what I am thinking of as 'American,' something that is earthy, something that sounds like the Hebrew original, a rough language, a language that is close to the earth and deep into human experience."³⁹ Indeed, upon close inspection of the Psalms, nothing seems out of bounds: joy, sadness, anger, despair, even murderous thoughts; all can be freely lifted to God in confidence and honesty without fear of reprisal or punishment.

When I was young, I struggled with many of the "battle Psalms" which ask God to strike our enemies and even to dash their babies' heads against rocks.⁴⁰ I was shocked such viciousness was in the Bible, let alone as a part of the Psalms prayed by the Church!

³⁹ Eugene Peterson, "The Psalms in American," 30 Good Minutes: Chicago Sunday Evening Club, February 23, 1992, <http://www.30goodminutes.org/index.php/archives/23-member-archives/364-eugene-h-peterson-program-3520>.

⁴⁰ Ps 137:9.

But as I grew in age, I began to appreciate such honest expressions of emotion, and now understand their value as spiritually cathartic, if not somewhat hyperbolic. There is no thought or emotion we can have that is going to surprise or offend God. Such Psalms give us vast permission to lay our entire lives open before God, even the darkest parts of our souls. When we lay our heart bare before God, stripped of all dignity and pretense of self-righteousness, only then do we find we are surrounded by grace, and God can begin to heal our soul and restore our spirit.

Some Christians may believe having faith means possessing unwavering belief, never doubting and, no matter how awful things get, never having negative feelings toward God. Yet this is not consistent with the biblical testimony. As Nadia Bolz-Weber writes,

It's like we've forgotten the strong, and totally awesome tradition in the Hebrew Bible of complaining to God. It's called lamenting—and we should totally reclaim this part of our tradition. . . . I have a friend who says if you're going to have a praise band in your church, that's fine but only if you also have a lament band because being the people of God has always meant a whole lot of both, praise and lament. And yet we think that being in a place of praise is having faith and being in a place of lament is lacking faith—but that's simply not true.⁴¹

Lament, doubt, anger, it is all a part of the biblical prayers expressed by the “heroes” of the biblical stories. This testimony gives us tremendous freedom to be completely honest in our prayers. We can approach God with confidence and boldness, knowing that we, too, will find mercy and grace in our time of need.⁴²

Rather than teach that prayer is something we ought to do, leaders should teach prayer is something we cannot help but do. In short, prayer happens. As Fox writes,

⁴¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, “A Sermon on Faith, Doubt, and Mustard Seed Necklaces,” Pathoes, October 7, 2013, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2013/10/complaining-to-god-a-sermon-on-faith-doubt-and-mustard-seed-necklaces/>.

⁴² Heb 4:16.

“Prayer is a far simpler, a far more common and a far less distant reality than many have been lead to believe. . . . In thinking on prayer and ourselves, the only unpardonable mistake will be our thinking we are not praying. This is unpardonable because it abrogates to ourselves what is truly the work of the Spirit.”⁴³ In this sense prayer is better understood as happening in *kairos* time rather than *chronos* time. Prayer occurs whenever we are open to the fullness and presence of God in the unexpected and unforeseen. Thus, the two walking on the road to Emmaus unexpectedly encounter Jesus on the road, and then together they turn aside to commune (*meno*) together at table.⁴⁴ Jesuit priest J. J. O’Leary writes, “I believe most of us pray far more than we think we do. Anytime we reflect on our families, our children, our students, our job, something we are grateful for, that is beautiful prayer.”⁴⁵ Likewise, rather than teach prayer as a discipline we should help people to recognize and accept it as a grace. “There is little hope,” writes Robinson, “in simply beating the old drum. We shall not impose a religious discipline except on the religious.”⁴⁶ Brother Lawrence cautioned that strict prayer practices could actually detract from the ultimate purpose of prayer: “Many do not advance in the Christian progress because they stick in penances and particular exercises, while they neglect the love of God, which is the end.”⁴⁷

Prayer happens, but it is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Prayer is the fruit of God’s spirit in us; when God’s spirit dwells deeply in us we cannot help but be in a state of constant prayer. Prayer is not a specific action carved out of a busy day; it should not

⁴³ Fox, *Prayer*, 25.

⁴⁴ Luke 24.

⁴⁵ J. J. O’Leary, “A Short Course on Prayer,” Ignatian Spirituality.com, accessed February 3, 2018, <http://www.marquette.edu/faith/a-short-course-on-prayer.php>.

⁴⁶ Robinson, *Honest to God*, 104.

⁴⁷ Brother Lawrence, *Practice the Presence of God*, 24.

be a task on our “to do” list, nor does it require words. Rather prayer permeates, undergirds and informs everything we are and do, it is an overflow from our being grounded in God. The words of St. Augustine, “Love God and do as you please” are radical (and thus dangerous), but they constitute the true heart of Christian prayer.⁴⁸ They are echoed by Brother Lawrence’s counsel in prayer, “Do not always scrupulously confine yourself to certain rules, or particular forms of devotion, but act with general confidence in God.”⁴⁹ Prayer happens when we are grounded in God’s presence, whether meditating, talking with a friend, or at work. Prayer happens organically because we were created for relationship with God. We do not need to work at prayer, rather we need to recognize prayer already at work in us, and *meno* in that reality.

Prayer is Not Moving God but God Moving Us

The most common and prevalent practice of prayer among Christians is that of petition. Indeed, when many people think of prayer, this is what they think of: asking God for things. However, if we understand God not as a Supernatural Being out there, but rather as the Ground of All Being in whom we live and dwell (*meno*), then what becomes of petitionary prayer? Just as church leaders can help guide people away from thinking of prayer as a daily discipline, so also, we can help people to understand prayer is not something we do to move or influence God. If God is not a Being, but rather is understood as the Ground of All Being in whom we live and move and have our being, then endeavoring to change or move God is not only futile, but entirely misguided. Yet

⁴⁸ Robinson, *Honest to God*, 104.

⁴⁹ Brother Lawrence, *Practice the Presence of God*, 24.

this is precisely what many Christians are taught to do via offering petitionary prayers, often under their religious leaders' tutelage.

Prayer which attempts to move God to act on our behalf is immature at best and narcissistic at worst. Children pray almost exclusively in the form of petitionary prayer. As one study on prayer found, "among the younger children the content of prayer was concerned primarily with gratification of personal desire."⁵⁰ Unfortunately, children are not the only ones susceptible to such prayers. It seems many Christians never grow out of this basic form of prayer as they are never taught otherwise.

Indeed, some theologies press petitionary prayer in an extreme direction. "Name it, claim it," and "Confession brings possession" are expressions that have come out of the Prosperity Gospel movement, which teaches that if we will only speak our wants and desires in faith, God is bound by "his" own word to deliver. Prosperity Gospel insists that God desires to bless us with material wealth and success, if we will only ask and believe in faith. As one pastor preached, "Fight the attack of the devil on my finances! Fight him! We declare financial blessings! Financial miracles this week, NOW NOW NOW! . . . More work! Better work! The best finances!"⁵¹ Such theology and prayers are difficult to reconcile with the central figure of Christianity who lived an austere life, paid no attention to material comforts, suffered for others, and died ignobly on a cross.

Bonhoeffer, writing from a Nazi prison cell and facing death, saw clearly the general misconception and misuse of petitionary prayer as calling upon God (only) when we need or want something. "God is no stop-gap; he must be recognized at the centre of

⁵⁰ David Elkind, *The Child's Reality: Three Developmental Themes*. Distinguished Lecture Series, (London: Psychology Press, 1978), 39.

⁵¹ Hanna Rosen, "Did Christianity Cause the Crash?", *The Atlantic*, December 2009, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/12/did-christianity-cause-the-crash/307764/>.

life, not when we are at the end of our resources; it is his will to be recognized in life, and not only when death comes; in health and vigor, and not only in suffering; in our activities, and not only in sin. The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.”⁵² For the sake of the spiritual health and growth of our parishioners, Christian leaders must present prayer not as a means to an end, but rather as the natural fruit of a relationship with God. As we mature as adults, we understand that a friend to whom we only turn to in need will not be a friend for long. As Fox puts it, “a friend is not one whom we ask to do things for us so much as one who is with us. By his or her presence we are supported and encouraged in doing what we must do.”⁵³ Church leaders need to help their parishioners understand prayer concerns God’s presence rather than God’s performance.

Some may point to scripture as exhorting and exemplifying the practice of petitionary prayer. Depending on one’s approach to the Bible, there can be validity to this claim. Abraham famously negotiated with God to not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if only ten righteous people could be found living there (ten were not found so the city was destroyed anyway).⁵⁴ Similarly, Moses pled with God successfully not to destroy the entire population of the Hebrew people who had recently been emancipated from slavery in Egypt.⁵⁵ It seems both are examples of God being moved, changed, if you will, by human prayer and intercession. Indeed, in the second story, the King James version states that God actually “*repented* of the *evil* which he thought to do unto the people”

⁵² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, Touchstone Edition, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 312.

⁵³ Fox, *Prayer*, 15.

⁵⁴ Gen 18-16-33.

⁵⁵ Exod 32:9-14.

(emphasis mine).⁵⁶ Taken at face value, it would seem from these passages petitionary prayers can have great influence upon God.

Yet these same stories raise serious problems for those who would take a literal approach to scripture and/or a conventional view of God. How is it, for example, that God can change “his” mind? If YHWH is all-knowing (omniscient), would not God know what “he” was going to do before “he” did it? Is not God “the same yesterday, today and forever”?⁵⁷ Even more troubling, how can God plan to do something “evil” and then “repent” of it? How can a loving God be reconciled with these stories of a God who seems vengeful and capricious? Such a reading and understanding of scripture raises unsettling questions when it comes to these passages’ portrayal of God and the practice of petitionary prayer.

Articulating a new way forward regarding the Christian understanding and practice of prayer is a deeply pastoral task requiring reflective thought, honest dialogue, and trust. So, likewise, is discussing alternative ways to read and understand scripture. Many Christians, and society in general, find it both difficult and uncomfortable to embrace the disturbing and incompatible portrayals of God presented within many biblical stories. At times in the Hebrew Scriptures, God is described as extremely harsh, jealous, and even vengeful. Just as modern Christians need a new (or a very old) way to understand prayer, so also a new hermeneutic of scripture is needed. This is deeply pastoral work which runs parallel to and springs from many of the same cultural and

⁵⁶ Exod 32:14 (KJV).

⁵⁷ Heb. 13:8.

theological tensions presented earlier in this work regarding prayer in a postmodern context.⁵⁸

The interpretation of Scripture is outside the scope of this paper, so only a cursory treatment will be given in this regard.⁵⁹ One approach to understanding the Bible is to read scripture through the lens of Christ. Since Jesus is recognized by Christians as the ultimate revelation of God, he himself becomes the measure by which all scripture is understood and applied. Christ is the standard: Does this passage conform with the life and teaching of Jesus? What do we as the Body of Christ make of this passage, how do we apply it to our faith and life in this time and place? These questions are best wrestled with in the context of a faith community rather than individually. It is the community's task to read, discern, interpret and declare the Gospel message found within the biblical stories. Both Christ's words and deeds are the revelation of God. As scripture is read through the person and work of Christ, Christians will find and proclaim the "Good News" embedded within the biblical stories, whether by positive or negative example. It is not necessary nor advised to always hear and understand scripture literally, but rather as its original audience did: spiritually, metaphorically, and symbolically.

This does not mean that some of the stories in the Bible did not *really* happen. Rather, it means that whether they happened exactly as they are recorded or not is secondary to the spiritual truth found in scripture when Jesus is used as our interpretive filter. One can take the Bible seriously without taking every word of it literally. The biblical stories were not intended to be read historically or scientifically. Rather, the

⁵⁸ See chapters 1 and 2.

⁵⁹ For a fuller treatment, see Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001).

Scriptures were written, read and preserved by faith communities who themselves were struggling to understand and articulate their experiences of God. Contrary to what some say, the Bible is not an instruction book (if only it were that easy, clear, and consistent!). Rather, scripture is not a book at all, but rather a collection of books that span centuries, containing mostly stories which reveal how faith communities through the ages have wrestled to know God and make sense of their experience of YHWH. This approach to reading and understanding the Bible recognizes scriptures' contextual influence and cultural limitations. The good news of God as revealed by Jesus is the heart of the biblical message for Christians. Christ is our hermeneutical norm.

The Bible is not a divine book; we do not worship it. Rather, for Christians it is a book about the Word (i.e. Jesus), and the Word points us to God.⁶⁰ As Christian leaders we must help people to read and understand scripture not as literal, wooden history, but as sacred stories which reveal spiritual truths about God's love for all the world as revealed in the person of Jesus. Its pages are filled with testimony, tales, songs, letters and parables which faith communities read and discussed as they strove to live out their relationship with God, not unlike we who continue to do so today. The stories are told from their vantage point and understanding, often clothed in premodern language. This cultural context should not prevent us from seeking the spiritual truths which undergird its sacred stories. We should not read the Bible as if were a coded instruction book, waiting to reveal its secrets to those who would dissect its covert meaning. Rather, we should approach scripture with prayerful and humble hearts, allowing these sacred texts

⁶⁰ John 1.

to read us, that they might reveal to us the truth which Christ proclaimed of God, a loving God who is still at work in and around us.

Through the lens of Christ, then, let us examine petitionary prayer as practiced by Jesus, the Church's norm. In one such text Jesus says, "Ask and it will be given to you. . . . If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"⁶¹ At first blush it may seem, incredibly, Jesus is saying that whatever we want, all we have to do is ask the Father and we shall receive it! Ask, seek, find—presto! This, however, is not the usual experience of countless people through the ages who have lifted petitionary prayers heavenward. As most any such person can testify, it simply does not work that way. Was, then, Jesus wrong? Or, perhaps did he mean something else here? Luke's rendition of this same story is helpful in gaining a fuller understanding of Jesus' meaning. "Ask and it will be given to you. . . . If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven *give the Holy Spirit* to those who ask him!" (emphasis mine)⁶² A key phrase in both passages is "good gifts," which Luke's gospel reveals as the "Holy Spirit." Thus, Jesus is encouraging us to ask for and seek "good gifts," i.e. the gift of the Spirit of God. This is the treasure, the "good gift" Jesus is imploring us to seek and find. Desiring God's Spirit should be the focus, intent and longing of all our prayers, indeed, of our entire lives.

A similar understanding can be applied to Jesus' teaching of the "Persistent Widow." Here Jesus tells a story of a widow who badgered a godless judge for justice. He closes by saying, "And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry

⁶¹ Matt 7:7-11.

⁶² Luke 11:9-13.

out to him day and night? . . . I tell you he will see that they get justice, and quickly.”⁶³

Again, it seems the point is not that we should keep badgering God for what we want, believing that if we just keep at it, God will eventually relent. Rather, upon a more careful and reflective reading, we find the point of the story is those who yearn for justice should not give up, God will answer their desire for fairness and will set things right—so do not give up the struggle! Keep seeking and demanding justice and your prayers will be answered.

Let us turn now and examine the most famous and well-known Christian prayer of all: The Lord’s Prayer. The prayer opens with a radical word, “Father.” This does not strike most Christians as remarkable because we are used to such language for God, and commonly employ it ourselves. However, the Jewish people seldom addressed God in prayer as “Father.”⁶⁴ Such use is not found in the Hebrew Scriptures. When Jesus referred to God as “Father,” it certainly must have struck Jewish ears as very strange, perhaps even borderline blasphemous. As Joachim Jeremias writes, the Aramaic word “Abba,” was “the chatter of a small child. . . . a children's word, used in everyday talk” and it was no doubt “disrespectful, indeed unthinkable to the sensibilities of Jesus' contemporaries to address God with this familiar word.”⁶⁵ Thus, the prayer begins by establishing a shocking level of intimacy between those praying and God.

Yet, in paradoxical fashion, the prayer then turns the other direction. In the next breath those praying acknowledge the otherness of God’s name: “Hallowed be your name.” Those praying this prayer concede, like Moses, that they do not know God’s

⁶³ Luke 18:7-8.

⁶⁴ Fox, *Prayer*, 57.

⁶⁵ Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 67.

name. All we can say about God's name is it is unutterably holy. In Jewish thought, to name someone meant to have power over them. To know a person's name was to have some level of access to them, to be his or her equal.⁶⁶ By admitting at the beginning of the prayer that we do not know God's name and that it is, in itself, holy beyond our language to express, we place ourselves in a properly humbled position. There will clearly not be any opportunity in this prayer to turn God into our cosmic bellhop. Thus, in the opening lines of this brief prayer, Jesus teaches us to recognize God as both one with whom we have an intimate relationship, and one whose holiness is beyond our ability to fathom, consistent with Panentheism. This puts us in an appropriate posture for prayer: humble affection and adoration.

To be clear, The Lord's Prayer contains petitions. It is not the praying of petitions which is wrong. Rather, as Jesus models to us in this prayer, the orienting focus of our petitions should, like all of Jesus' earthly ministry, center on the Kingdom of God. "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven."⁶⁷ The very first petition of The Lord's Prayer concerns the Kingdom of God. In fact, Matthew 6:10 contains a parallelism: it is the same thought expressed twice in two different ways. Parallelism is a chief characteristic found within Hebrew poetry in which the second phrase is a restating of the first phrase for emphasis. The Psalms are full of parallelisms. We find such in The Lord's Prayer as well, "Your will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven," is a parallelism to "Your kingdom come." They are one and the same request, stated twice for emphasis. Thus, we might conclude since the Kingdom of God is the topic of the first petition, and since this is the only petition stated twice as a parallelism, it is arguably the

⁶⁶ John Shelby Spong, *Honest Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 2000), 48.

⁶⁷ Matthew 6:10.

most important of all the petitions. And what would the Kingdom of God look like on Earth? The following petitions are the answer to this question: all would have “daily bread;” all would be reconciled, i.e. forgiving others as they themselves receive forgiveness; and all would be spared from trials and delivered from evil.⁶⁸ If The Lord’s Prayer were diagramed, here is how it might appear:

A. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name.

1. Your kingdom come = Your will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven, e.g.:

- a. Give us today our daily bread;
- b. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us;
- c. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

This is Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God on Earth for which he teaches us to pray. To pray in the form of petitions, then, is to pray for God’s Kingdom to come and God’s will to be done in our lives, “on Earth.” This longing of The Lord’s Prayer serves as the supreme model of our petitionary prayers, always and everywhere.

If petitions then are a legitimate form of prayer which Jesus himself taught, what is their purpose if they do not influence God to act? In the movie *Shadowlands*, C. S. Lewis’ wife is suffering from cancer. Trying to console Lewis in his grief, a friend remarked, “I know how hard you have been praying, and now God is answering your prayers.” Lewis responded, “That’s not why I pray. I pray because I can’t help myself. I pray because I’m helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking

⁶⁸ Pope Francis recently recommended changing the English wording of this petition from “lead us not into temptation” to “do not let us fall into temptation.” The first is not a good translation, he said, because God does not lead humans to sin, see BBC News, “Lord’s Prayer: Pope Francis Calls for Change,” December 8, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42279427>.

and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me.”⁶⁹ Put simply, the purpose of petitionary prayer is to move us, not God. As Eugene Peterson states, “The task [of prayer] is not to get God to do something I think needs done, but to become aware of what God is doing so that I can participate in it.”⁷⁰

Genesis 32 tells the epic story of Jacob struggling (praying?) all night with an angel, or God, or whoever or whatever being he wrestled with that night. By the end of that struggle two things had happened: (1) Jacob had a new name, “Israel,” and (2) he walked with a limp for the rest of his life. The next morning Jacob, now Israel, made peace with his long-time estranged enemy: his brother, Esau. The name, “Israel,” means, “one who struggles with God.” Many prayers are, in fact, a wrestling match with God, but in the end, it is always we who come away forever changed, sometimes limping, but healed; sometimes even prepared to reconcile with our enemy.

Even Jesus seemed changed via petitionary prayer. Friedrich Schleiermacher, speaking of Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane, notes, “we cannot expect more from our prayers than Christ obtained by His. For if the granting of our petitions is a token of God's favour, then it would certainly have been given above all to him in whom God was so supremely well-pleased.”⁷¹ But God did not remove the cup from Jesus as he prayed, and “the result of his prayer was Jesus’ being changed, to accept and undergo the chalice he so dreaded.”⁷² Soren Kierkegaard agrees with Lewis, Peterson and Schleiermacher, stating: “A hasty explanation could assert that to pray is a useless act, because a man’s

⁶⁹ Though this quote seems to reflect the spirit of Lewis’ theology, it is not found anywhere in his writings.

⁷⁰ Eugene Peterson, “Twenty Eugene Peterson Quotes on Prayer,” Prayer Coach, May 17, 2016, <http://prayer-coach.com/2016/05/17/18-eugene-peterson-quotes-prayer/>.

⁷¹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Pioneer of Modern Theology*, ed. Keith W. Clements (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 186.

⁷² Fox, *Prayer*, 15.

prayer does not alter the unalterable. . . . The prayer does not change God, but it changes the one who offers it.”⁷³

Petitionary and intercessory prayer, then, are not us asking God to intervene. Indeed, such an understanding of prayer gives the problem of theodicy traction: Why would God choose to help some and not others? Rather than trying to move God on someone’s behalf, our prayers help us align our vision with God’s vision, our prayers move us. There is power in prayer when we join our hearts as a community and agree that a situation is out of line with God’s will, God vision, and God’s kingdom. It compels those of us who take such prayers seriously to act. Prayers of passion lead to action. The history of the Church is undergirded and shaped by such prayers.

For example, sociologist Rodney Stark attributes the surprising growth of the early Church to their unprecedented care of others. Unlike the pagans, Christians cared for each other, even those outside their flock. Thus, in the fourth century, the emperor Julian wrote a letter to his high priest complaining that the “Galileans” (i.e. Christians) took better care of the sick and poor than did their own pagan priests. As Stark writes, the emperor believed the growth of Christianity

was caused by their “moral character, even if pretended,” and by their “benevolence toward strangers and care for the graves of the dead.” In a letter to another priest, Julian wrote, “I think that when the poor happened to be neglected and overlooked by the priests, the impious Galileans observed this and devoted themselves to benevolence.” And he also wrote, “The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.”⁷⁴

⁷³ Soren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, Start Publishing eBook, 2012 edition, <https://books.google.com/books?id=50CXDAAAQBAJ&pg=PT17&lpg=PT17&dq#v=onepage&q&f=false>

⁷⁴ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 81.

Indeed, there is a dialectical flow to prayer, but it is not transactional in nature. Rather, “prayer is a back and forth movement between us and God in the whole of our lives, between God’s continual grace and our continual response.”⁷⁵ Rather than having God grant a miracle for us, petitionary prayer directs us outward. Through prayer we remember others as we join our hearts and minds with those people and places in need of the Kingdom of God here and now. We join with them in their suffering to bring about healing, daily bread, reconciliation and wholeness. Yet as Tillich writes, this is not our work, rather it is God who prays through us. “That is what Spirit means. Spirit is another word for ‘God present,’ with shaking, inspiring, transforming power. Something in us, which is not we ourselves, intercedes before God for us.”⁷⁶ Our prayers join our hearts with God’s heart. As Mother Teresa put it, “I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that he will guide me to do whatever I’m supposed to do, what I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I’m praying for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us and we change things.”⁷⁷ Prayer does not take us out of the world, rather, it immerses us in the world, and it is precisely to this idea which we shall now turn.

⁷⁵ Roberta Bondi, *To Pray and to Love*, 12.

⁷⁶ Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2005), 137.

⁷⁷ Mother Teresa, “St. Mother Teresa Quotes on Prayer,” Vatican Site, May 14, 2017, <http://vaticansite.com/st-mother-teresa-quotes-prayer/>.

CHAPTER FOUR

WORLDLY PRAYER

We are back at the Jewish priestly conception of the relation of the sacred to the secular which was shattered by the Incarnation when God declared all things holy and the veil of the temple was rent from top to bottom.

—John A. T Robinson, *Honest to God*

In 2001, the Enron Corporation declared bankruptcy. We had recently moved from the Houston area and knew several people in Houston who were affected by Enron's collapse, both directly and indirectly. Enron was a huge energy and natural gas company that claimed earnings of nearly \$101 billion in 2000, employing twenty-thousand people. In 2001 it was revealed that Enron executives had practiced institutionalized and systematic accounting fraud. Put simply, they were "cooking the books." It was one of the largest financial examples of willful white-collar corporate fraud and corruption in the history of our nation. Thousands of workers and investors lost their entire life savings and pensions.

I found it especially grievous and tragic because many of the Enron executives who were brought up on charges, and later convicted, were active members of prominent churches in the Houston area. Ken Lay, the founder and president of Enron, was the son of a pastor and active in a large Methodist church. At the even larger Houston Second Baptist Church, where several Enron executives attended, the pastor described them as "very solid, churchgoing, community-minded people."¹ Ed Young, Senior pastor of

¹ John Longhurst, "Enron, Fraud and the Church," Winnipeg Free Press, July 26, 2003, <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/historic/31383439.html>.

Houston Second Baptist Church, testified at trial on behalf of Ken Lay, saying, “I believe he loves God, I believe he works hard, and I believe he's a man who keeps his word.”² Similarly disgraced and convicted WorldCom founder and CEO, Bernie Ebbers, taught Sunday School and served as a deacon in his Baptist church.³ These high-profile cases point to an unfortunate and prevalent problem within our churches today: many of our members, even the most upstanding and active, display a stark disconnect between their professed Christian faith and their daily lives. Their prayers and worship on Sunday have little or no bearing on their work at the office on Monday. American church leaders, conservative and mainstream alike, have created, perpetuated, and accommodated a bifurcation between religion and daily-life.

Bifurcation of the Sacred from the Secular

This problem is not new. The fracture between the Church and the world has been in existence and growing for centuries. This rupture is exacerbated when the Church teaches or infers the body (aka “flesh”) is evil while the spirit is good. Consider this passage from Thomas a Kempis’ very popular and influential fifteenth-century book, *The Imitation of Christ*: “The more violence you use against yourself, the greater will be your spiritual progress. . . . You are wrong, you are wrong if you seek anything other than to suffer trials; for this whole mortal life is full of miseries. . . . And the more the flesh is subdued by affliction, the more the spirit is strengthened by inward grace.”⁴ This

² Bob Allen, “Baptist Leader Vouches for Convicted Enron Head,” *EthicsDaily.com*, May 26, 2006, <http://www.ethicsdaily.com/baptist-leader-vouches-for-convicted-enron-head-cms-7410>.

³ Longhurst, “Enron, Fraud and the Church.”

⁴ Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, ed. Hal M. Helms (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 1982), 53, 82.

dichotomy between the flesh and the spirit can infer that the daily lives we live “in the flesh,” here in the muck and mire of the world, are a sort of necessary evil which we must endure until we can attain heaven in the next life. There, it is believed, all will be as it should and as God wills.

Thus, Trappist Monk and priest Thomas Keating notes, “The ascetical teaching that most priests, monks, and nuns received in seminaries and novitiates was influenced in varying degrees by certain heresies that have plagued the Church throughout the centuries.”⁵ He goes on to lament that conversely, “the mystical teaching of the spiritual masters of the Church was almost completely ignored. As a result, the Church has been in a spiritual desert for the past several centuries and unable to nourish her children with the solid food of contemplative prayer.”⁶ Rather than espousing a life-affirming theology which promotes a holistic understanding of ourselves as created both body and soul, sacred and secular, individual and communal, church leaders have often furthered an unbiblical theology which divides us into sections which have nothing to do with each other and are thus difficult, if not impossible, to integrate.

Another disturbing example may be taken from the eighteenth-century figure of John Newton, author of the beloved hymn, “Amazing Grace.” As a respectable Englishman and ship captain, Newton found himself in the slave trade. As captain, he oversaw the packing of suffocating human beings chained to one another into the hold of his ship. Afterward, as a practicing Christian, he would retire to his comfortable cabin for his daily Bible reading and prayers.⁷ By teaching our members they should “pray in

⁵ Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2015), 156.

⁶ Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 156.

⁷ Matthew Fox, *Prayer: A Radical Response to Life* (New York: Penguin Group, 2001), 2.

private,” and that they must come to church to encounter God,⁸ we promote the compartmentalization of the sincere faith of our parishioners from their lives in the “real world.” Prayer that is “between me and God,” leads to a split between private piety and public responsibility, between the sacred cloister and the secular world. Jeb Magruder, who oversaw the Watergate coverup, later confessed about Nixon’s cabinet of men, “we had a private morality but no sense of a public morality. Instead of applying our private morality to public affairs, we accepted the President’s standards of political behavior, and the results were tragic for him and for us.”⁹ Contrary to the first petition of The Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven,” our Christian tradition has often fostered an unhealthy split between earth and heaven.

In this same vein of thought, It is unfortunate the word “spiritual” has taken on the meaning of “transitory” and “other-worldly” in our day. The Hebrew understanding of “spirit” was just the opposite: it meant “life.” To have “spirit” meant quite literally to be alive, to be of this world, alive on earth. The Hebrew word *ruah* means all the following: breath, spirit, air, and wind. To be alive with spirit meant that one prayed naturally, with every breath. Our lives are a prayer because we are spiritual begins. This was Paul’s thinking when he assured the Christian community in Rome that our spirit prays with God’s spirit, often without using words.¹⁰ To live is to pray. As Tolstoy wrote, “To know God and to live are the same thing: God is life.”¹¹

⁸ Thus, perhaps better securing our jobs as clergy?

⁹ Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 191.

¹⁰ Rom 8:23-27.

¹¹ Fox, *Prayer*, 62.

The key question becomes not, “Do you pray?” but rather, “What kind of prayer is your life praying?” I wonder if today people have left the Church, in part, because they were not taught how to integrate their worship experience with their life. The Church has taken them out of the world rather than empowering them to live in it. As Thompson writes, “Most of us have a genuine desire for coherence between the inner and outer life. We search for unity between personal and social holiness. Horrifying breaches of justice in the world kindle in us a fire to connect prayer, compassion, and righteousness. . . . The spiritual life is not one slice of existence but leaven for the whole loaf.”¹² The Hebrews’ understanding of faith was that it was totally integrated with one’s life. There was no separation between the sacred and the secular, no degradation of creation, physical matter, or our bodies. A Jewish person would have completely understood Jesus words, “I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly.” It would make perfect sense in their theology for the Messiah to provide gallons of premium wine for a wedding. A life lived fully and deeply *was* a godly life, and so to this day, the Jewish people toast, *L’kaiem!*, “To life!”

Jesus’ teaching nested with this Hebrew understanding of life and creation throughout the Gospels. We are to consider ourselves the “light of the world,” and we should not hide that light under a basket, nor in a private room or a cloistered church. Some Christians might point to Matthew 6:5-6 as a prooftext that Jesus taught we should pray in private. Some use this passage as justification to keep their faith life segregated from their daily lives, reassured, perhaps, they are not publicly accountable for that which should be kept private. Such misguided theology gives us permission to conveniently

¹² Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 14.

compartmentalize our lives into our religious-self and our public-self. Yet we must consider the context of the passage. When our parishioners are praying out on street corners in order to look pious and draw attention to themselves (something that in my experience has never happened in Lutheran circles) then we should preach Matthew 6:5-6 with vigor and assert as Jesus did, “Go into your closet and pray!” Until then, church leaders need to push from the opposite direction, teaching our members to pray fervently as Jesus taught in the verses immediately following: for the inbreaking of God’s will into the whole of our lives here and now—“Thy Kingdom Come!”¹³

Even the monastics did not lead the insular lives many may imagine. Indeed, “a false myth exists up to this day declaring that a medieval monk withdrew from his culture.”¹⁴ Quite the contrary, many of the monasteries were the center of culture, politically, commercially, medically, agriculturally, and educationally. Likewise, Bondi notes most Christian monks believed “the goal of the Christian life is love of God and love of neighbor. Prayer for them was the ground in which that love was to grow.”¹⁵ Christianity is no insular religion. Our lives of faith must be seamlessly integrated into the way we relate to family, friend, and foe, how we make decisions, spend our resources, and cast our votes. If not, then our faith is in name only. “The Spirit insists on transforming us at every level: personal, social, economic, and political. God is Lord of the whole of our lives.”¹⁶

¹³ Matthew 6:10-13.

¹⁴ Fox, *Prayer*, 6.

¹⁵ Roberta C. Bondi, *To Pray & to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 11.

¹⁶ Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 14-15.

Prayer as Immersion Rather Than Withdrawal

Certainly, there is a healthy rest and *meno-ing*¹⁷ with God that can happen when we retire for private prayer. Our souls require times of quiet and solitude. Prayer can be a time of disengagement from the world, so to speak. Yet, it is the purpose of this disengagement which must be carefully discerned and, unfortunately, is often misunderstood. I remember printed at the end of our church bulletin every Sunday were the words, “Gathered to Worship, Scattered to Serve.” For years I wrongly interpreted this as: “Here at church I must garner my spiritual strength so that I might take the plunge back into the world and bring salvation to any who might be receptive to the Gospel.” Such sentiment left me with the impression that church was a holy place where God was, while the world was largely profane and devoid of God. I had to hold my spiritual breath when I reentered it. Yet in some regard, I had it backwards, we do not form our prayers in church on Sunday to take back into the world; rather the grist for our prayers come from our experiences in the world which overflow in and through our Sunday expression of praise, lament, and worship. Such prayer is a means, not an end, and its purpose is to enable us to engage and transform the world to better reflect God’s kingdom, precisely as the Lord’s Prayer directs. As renowned theologian and author Douglas John Hall writes, prayer is “thinking our way into God’s world,” and such prayers that do not result in engagement with the world are dubious. We must keep prayer, thought, and action woven tightly together.¹⁸ Prayer happens in and with the world, prayer is active, prayer is both inhaling and exhaling.

¹⁷ See definition and use of this Greek word in chapter 3 of this work.

¹⁸ Douglas J. Hall, *When You Pray: Thinking Your Way into God’s World*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 58.

Several years ago, I took a bike trip with my son around the state of South Carolina. We had a wonderful trip and made some treasured memories. On the trip, there were two things I found surprising: First, traveling by bicycle is a very social experience. Because we were not enclosed in a car, I found we regularly interacted with other people much more than I had anticipated. At stop signs and intersections, at convenience stores and restaurants, stopping to take a picture, rest stops, etc., conversation with strangers happened naturally and frequently. People were interested in what we were doing and where we were going. I am an introvert by nature and not a naturally talkative person, but I found myself in conversation with countless people with whom I would never have interacted had we been traveling by car.

Secondly, traveling by bicycle is a very vulnerable experience. I never imagined when we started our trip how much we would rely on the kindness of strangers. My son and I often asked for directions, or if we could fill our water bottles, get out of the rain, or use a restroom. Once we were stranded on a remote road when a chain came off one of our bikes. A stranger passing by pulled over in a beat-up truck, causing me some concern. A large African-American man emerged from the truck and fixed the chain for us. Random people routinely offered us food and water, even shelter. Our bikes were never touched, and our gear never tampered with when we went into convenience stores to refresh ourselves. I am not Pollyannaish. I know there are evil people in the world and that we all have a dark side. Yet, what surprised me on this trip was how many good, kind-hearted people we encountered who were surprisingly gracious and friendly.

This experience, among others, has caused me to ponder if perhaps Christians are conditioned to think of people in general, and non-Christians/strangers in particular, as

more depraved and dangerous than they really are. As leaders we might help our members reframe our Christian view of the world. The world is not, in fact, our enemy, rather, it is the very place in which we find God. It is unfortunate some churches have developed an “us vs. them” mentality when it comes to society. As Gerson notes rather pointedly, “The primary evangelical political narrative is adversarial, an angry tale about the aggression of evangelicalism’s cultural rivals. In a remarkably free country, many evangelicals view their rights as fragile, their institutions as threatened, and their dignity as assailed.”¹⁹ Perhaps we should regularly remind our parishioners that God (so) loves the world, and that there is “that of God in every man.”²⁰

In 1900 the editor of a small Disciples of Christ magazine in Des Moines, Iowa, renamed the magazine, *The Christian Century*. The title was based on the belief that “genuine Christian faith could live in mutual harmony with the modern developments in science, technology, immigration, communication and culture that were already under way.”²¹ Since then the magazine has become the predominate periodical of mainline and progressive Protestantism. Many conservative and fundamentalist Christians have been critical of its emphasis upon social justice and its relatively favorable view of humankind. Indeed, many have insisted that all hopefulness set forth in its pages regarding the progress of humankind in the twentieth-century was summarily shattered by the overwhelming evils and decimation of two major world wars. Yet, we should consider

¹⁹ Michael Gerson, “Trump and the Evangelical Temptation,” *The Atlantic*, April 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/04/the-last-temptation/554066/>, accessed March 12, 2018.

²⁰ George Fox quoted by Lewis Benson in “‘That of God in Every Man’ - What Did George Fox Mean by It?”, *Quaker Religious Thought*, Vol. 24, Article 2, 1970, <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol24/iss1/2>.

²¹ Paul D. Matheny, *Contextual Theology: The Drama of Our Times* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2011), 2.

Bonhoeffer, who experienced firsthand the brunt force and malevolence of the Nazi political machine. Bonhoeffer accused the Church of his day rather than the secular people for failing to act in the face of the ruthless Nazi regime. “When in 1933 the Protestant Church in Germany greeted the brutal exclusion of entire social groups as the ‘restoration of order,’ Bonhoeffer’s was the single voice speaking for the victims.”²² Bonhoeffer saw the Church as complicit with the Nazi’s agenda and wrote in a letter to Reinhold Niebuhr on February 6, 1933, “The way of the church is darker than almost ever before.”²³

Indeed, the twentieth-century revealed not that humankind has grown more malicious, but rather that technological advances, such as the development of weapons capable of killing *en masse*, can greatly amplify the evil of a few when they are not put in check by the faithful.²⁴ Thus, despite the World Wars of the twentieth century, and perhaps in part because of them, social-consciousness is increasing rather than waning in our society. The civil rights movement, environmentalism, the promoting of women’s and human rights, and the legalization of gay marriage are all signs of the growth of our culture. As Spong notes, “We see [Christ-consciousness] in our increasing sensitivity to, and in the enhanced sense of our responsibility for, the life of our world. All of these things, I believe, are the result of a new awareness of what it means to be human.”²⁵

For this reason, becoming a religionless society is not necessarily to say we are becoming a godless society. Quite the opposite, it seems some secular people are godlier

²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Who is Christ for Us?* ed. Craig L. Nessel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 9.

²³ Bonhoeffer, *Who is Christ for Us?*, 9.

²⁴ See Martin Niemöller’s poem, “First They Came for the Socialists,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed March 12, 2018, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392>.

²⁵ John Shelby Spong, *Eternal Life: A New Vision* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 162, Kindle.

than those who attend church. These may be precisely the people whom Jesus had in mind when he told the parable of “The Sheep and the Goats.” It was the non-religious who were in fact “the righteous,” which is perhaps why they asked in surprise, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you?”²⁶ The parable, which notably is Jesus’ last parable in Matthew’s Gospel, is remarkable in that it has nothing to do with religion or belief, but rather concerns only care of the poor and marginalized. In the words of the immortal Christian song-writer, Keith Green, “My friends, the only difference between these two groups of people, according to these scriptures, is what they did and didn’t do.”²⁷ Less than a year before he was executed, Bonhoeffer scratched out some “Notes” for a book he wished to write if he was released from prison. One of the sections of his notes is entitled, “Unconscious Christianity . . . Matt. 25.”²⁸ I cannot help but wonder if Bonhoeffer’s “radical religionless”²⁹ society of “Unconscious Christianity” is precisely what Jeremiah envisioned when he wrote, “I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”³⁰

When prayer and worship become a realm into which we withdraw from the world so that we might “be with God,” our religion becomes perverted. Such thinking relegates the entire realm of the “non-religious” (i.e. the world) to the profane.³¹ Yet

²⁶ Matt 25:37.

²⁷ Keith Green, “The Sheep and the Goats (live),” YouTube, published May 25, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ix8ddosjg-k>.

²⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, Touchstone Edition, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 380-381.

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 280.

³⁰ Jer 31:33-34.

³¹ John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), 86-87.

Christ is not found in religion, Christ is found in the world, especially in the suffering.³² Jesus warned that “saying prayers,” rather than being prayerful, can lead to hypocrisy and a false sense of righteousness: “Beware of the scribes, who like . . . to be greeted with respect in the market-places. . . . They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.”³³ The separation of the sacred from the secular was “shattered by the Incarnation when God declared all things holy and the veil of the temple was rent from top to bottom.”³⁴ Or, as Teilhard de Chardin puts it, “By virtue of Creation, and still more the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see.”³⁵

It should not surprise us, then, that Jesus’ harshest condemnation was not for the “worldly” people: prostitutes, adulterers, thieves, nor even the wealthy. In fact, he did not condemn them at all but instead regularly ate and drank with them!³⁶ Rather Jesus’ most severe criticism was directed toward the religious leaders of his day. “His indictment of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew spares no anger in pronouncing his judgment on the pseudo-pious: ‘Hypocrites,’ ‘blind guides,’ ‘fools,’ ‘whitewashed tombs,’ ‘lawless serpents,’ ‘brood of vipers,’ and finally, ‘murderers.’ These are the epitaphs Jesus reserves for the pious.”³⁷ Jesus condemned religious peoples’ careful and inane prayers and observances of the letter of the law while neglecting the “weightier matters”: love of God and neighbor, justice and mercy, and care of the poor.

³² Matt 25:31-46.

³³ Mark 12:38-40.

³⁴ Robinson, *Honest to God*, 87.

³⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, quoted in *Gospel Without Borders: Separating Christianity from Culture in America*, by Jim Rotholz (Searcy, AR: Resource Publications, 2015), 262.

³⁶ Luke 15:2.

³⁷ Fox, *Prayer*, 5.

Pietism errors in the same direction by extolling the practice of religion, especially private religion, over against engagement in and with the world. “I go into my prayer closet and shut my door” is a mantra of pietism. The image is of withdrawing from the world in order to “draw closer to God.” Yet often the one praying in the closet never comes out to engage the world as commanded by Christ, and thus they miss Christ’s presence in the other. Those who served Christ, i.e. the hungry, thirsty, alien, naked, sick and imprisoned, did so in the world, and apparently did not consider such service “religious.”³⁸ Merton asserts the goal of prayer is not to elevate ourselves above “the ordinary struggles and suffering of human existence . . . as if [the one praying] were almost an angel, untouched by matter and passion.”³⁹ In this same vein Martin Luther writes, “Beware of aspiring to such purity that you will not wish to be looked upon as a sinner or to be one. For Christ dwells only in sinners.”⁴⁰ The purpose of prayer, then, is not to lift us out of this world, but rather to immerse and infuse the ordinary happenings of our daily lives with sacred meaning and Presence.

Likewise, the prophets time and again call people to repentance; not to come out of the world, but rather to enter more fully into the world through acts of justice, kindness and mercy. Neglecting the poor and marginalized in favor of greed and self-comfort led to the ultimate doom of Israel’s Northern Kingdom. Amos writes to the ill-fated Israelites, the Lord says, “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . . Take away the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing

³⁸ Matt 25:37-40.

³⁹ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 23.

⁴⁰ Martin Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, edited and trans. by Theodore G. Tappert (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 110.

stream.”⁴¹ Throughout the book, Amos outlines God’s specific complaint: a litany of disregard for the poor and needy, “you trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land . . . buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals,⁴² and selling the sweepings of the wheat. The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.”⁴³ Amos was written around 750 B.C.E. The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians about thirty years later, never to return.

Private prayer that concerns only the spiritual matters of the one praying alone in their closet lacks the necessary elements of cultural reflection and engagement which were both preached by the prophets and modeled by Jesus. As Robinson writes, “The purpose of worship [and prayer] is not to retire from the secular into the department of the religious, let alone to escape from ‘this world’ into ‘the other world,’ but to open oneself to the meeting of the Christ in the common. . . . to focus, sharpen and deepen our response to the world. . . . Anything that fails to do this is not Christian worship, be it ever so ‘religious’.”⁴⁴

Communion with God and Others

The term “religion” has fallen out of favor in much of society and even within the Christian community itself. The reasons are multifaceted, yet there is one aspect of the word I wish to recover and preserve. The word “religion” is believed to have come to us from the Latin *religare*, which means “to bind.” It is related to our English word,

⁴¹ Amos 5:21-24.

⁴² Here I cannot help but think of people who work in third-world “sweat-shops” making cloths for Americans to buy cheaply at discount stores.

⁴³ Amos 8:4-7, see also 2:7, 4:1, 5:11.

⁴⁴ Robinson, *Honest to God*, 87-88.

“ligament.” Our ligaments are flexible connective tissues which hold our bones together, or, to put it another way, without ligaments our bodies would fall apart. Religion is about binding us together, to each other, to our faith, to God. Religion connects us. In this sense religion is a beautiful thing, so long as it remains, like ligaments, “flexible.” If it becomes rigid religion will lose its ability to bind. Just as a body with rigid ligaments is arthritic, so also the Body of Christ with a rigid religion will suffer ailments, usually in the form of hypocrisy and petty obsessiveness over unimportant matters. Such rigidity does not promote unity or community.

Given my assertion that “prayer is connection,” prayer and religion have much to do with each other, in fact, in this sense, they are synonymous. It is notable that when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, Jesus taught them a communal rather than a private prayer. The first word of The Lord’s Prayer is, in fact, “Our.” Yet most Protestants tend to think of prayer as a private, individual endeavor. As one author writes, “This subjectification or privatization of prayer reduces the *Our* Father to a *My* Father. . . . Meanwhile, the ‘world’ (i.e., nonchurch) went its own way.”⁴⁵ Yet even private prayers may bind us together with others. Indeed, as Father Keating notes, “Centering Prayer . . . bonds us with everyone else in the Mystical Body of Christ and indeed with the whole human family. There is really no such thing as private prayer.”⁴⁶ This may be the litmus test of true prayer: if it is not connecting us to something greater than ourselves, i.e. God or others, then it may be a misguided exercise rather than actual prayer.

⁴⁵ Fox, *Prayer*, 9.

⁴⁶ Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 167-168.

In a mystical sense, when we pray for others we make them a part of ourselves. As Father McCaffrey writes, “It is not just a question of ‘remembering’ a sick friend, an unemployed neighbor or a distressed relative, but somehow of ‘becoming’ those for whom I pray.”⁴⁷ Prayer opens us to the reality that on both a spiritual and biological level, we are, in fact, all one. As Bishop Spong notes, “The same dust that makes up the stars of our universe constitutes the substance of our human bodies and perhaps our minds. . . . all matter within our universe, from the farthest star to the content of your body and mine, is interconnected.”⁴⁸ Interestingly, Albert Einstein, who penned a letter to a distraught father who had lost his young son, wrote in a similar vein:

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us "Universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.⁴⁹

Compassion is more than just a warm feeling for someone. Rather it is a sense of oneness with another person. “The root of compassion is solidarity, the basic reality of our shared human experience.”⁵⁰ Perhaps for this reason, Jesus established reconciliation as a prerequisite to genuine prayer and worship. “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave

⁴⁷ Eugene McCaffrey, *Patterns of Prayer*, (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2003), 93.

⁴⁸ Spong, *Eternal Life*, 146, Kindle.

⁴⁹ Albert Einstein, Letter dated February 12, 1950, as quoted by *New York Times* in “The Einstein Papers. A Man of Many Parts,” March 29, 1972. <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/03/29/archives/the-einstein-papers-a-man-of-many-parts-the-einstein-papers-man-of.html>.

⁵⁰ McCaffrey, *Patterns of Prayer*, 89.

your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”⁵¹

In this line of thinking, Holy Communion itself is a profound act of uniting prayer. For centuries faith traditions within the Christian Church have focused on and debated the nature of the bread and the wine: if it became Christ’s body, or was merely a symbol; how it became Christ’s body; when, exactly, it became Christ’s body, etc. But perhaps Jesus used common bread and wine to drive home the point that they were ordinary elements and not to be the main focus of the meal. Perhaps at the Last Supper Jesus was teaching, via demonstration, the sacred nature of all things ordinary - *when they are mixed with his spirit and presence*. When we gather, it is not so much the bread and the wine that become Christ, but us, collectively, who become the Body of Christ. Would that we might “handle” our brothers and sisters in Christ with the same reverence with which we give the consecrated bread and wine! The Lord’s Supper is not about us individually ingesting a consubstantiated or transubstantiated morsel of bread and wine. Rather the “Great Thanksgiving” is about the *Holy Communion* that happens when people, filled with the spirit of Christ, gather in prayer as a forgiven and reconciled community to share in an ordinary meal, thus becoming *one in Christ*.

The poet William Blake writes, “And we are put on Earth a little space, / That we may learn to bear the beams of love.”⁵² Ultimately, prayer is the process of learning to attune ourselves to bear these beams of love which come from God. Prayer leads us to become ec-centric people: freed to focused outwardly on others rather than turning

⁵¹ Matt 5:23-24.

⁵² William Blake, *The Little Black Boy*, Poetry Foundation, accessed March 11, 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43671/the-little-black-boy>.

inward upon ourselves. “By [prayer] we are able to discover who we are and move toward who we are to become. By it we become able to love, to care for the people who have been entrusted to us; our immediate neighbor and our far neighbors in the whole of God’s world.”⁵³

There is an ancient story of a monk, Dorotheos of Gaza, who when asked by a junior monk what the Christian life was about, gave this illustration: He drew a circle with a compass. At the center of the circle is God, he said. The straight lines drawn from the circumference of the circle to the center are the lives of people. Dorotheos then remarked, you see, “the closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God.”⁵⁴ Thus, Bonhoeffer writes near the end of his life from a prison cell in Nazi Germany, “Our relation to God is not a ‘religious’ relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable – that is not authentic transcendence – but our relation to God is a new life in ‘existence for others’, through participation in the being of Jesus. The transcendental is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbour who is within reach in any given situation.”⁵⁵ In the end, compassion is love and prayer is love, and they all are one and the same.

⁵³ Bondi, *To Pray and to Love*, 12.

⁵⁴ Eric P. Wheeler, *Dorotheos of Gaza: Discourses and Sayings*, trans. Eric P. Wheeler (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 138-139.

⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 381.

CHAPTER FIVE

PROJECT DESIGN

Now that some of the theological and biblical foundations surrounding prayer have been established, this brings us to the congregational-based research project, entitled: “*40 Days of Prayer: Connecting Prayer and Life/A Lenten Journey of Prayer Connecting with God, Self, and Others*.” In this chapter we will discuss the conceptual plan for the thesis-project in detail. I chose to conduct the project during the season of Lent, but it could be offered during any six-week time-period of the year. Liturgical pastors sometimes scramble for a meaningful Lenten Program they can use each year for the six weeks of Lent. In part, I created this congregational project hoping it may be useful to other pastors who might use it as a Lenten/congregational resource.

One of the advantages of conducting this project during Lent is I was guaranteed to have participants during the Wednesday evening sessions, since about forty-fifty people attend Wednesday evening Lenten services faithfully each year within our congregation. This project consists of five lines of effort: (1) An abbreviated Wednesday evening Lenten service with a pastoral “meditation” offered on an aspect of prayer; (2) Wednesday evening small group discussion (following the service); (3) Thematic Sunday School “Prayer Practices;” (4) A Sunday morning worship sermon-series on the weekly prayer-theme; and (5) Corporate “Prayers of the People” during the Sunday worship. Each of these will be explored in detail within this chapter.

Wednesday Evening Service with Meditation on Prayer

The Wednesday evenings were a central feature of this project. Each week we focused as a congregation on a theological aspect of prayer in a theologically progressive manner which built upon itself. Since the first Wednesday night service was Ash Wednesday, it was given a full fifty minutes, which included the imposition of ashes. Ash Wednesday is a significant and powerful rite for Lutherans, so I chose to let it stand as is. Conveniently, the lectionary reading for Ash Wednesday lends itself very well to the topic of prayer (Matt 6:1-15), which I capitalized upon. Following Ash Wednesday, the evening services, to include the meditation, were abbreviated to about twenty minutes. Thus, the schedule for Ash Wednesday was different from the following Wednesday-evening Lenten Services.

After Ash Wednesday, each Wednesday evening began with a Soup Supper. This is a traditional practice in many Lutheran congregations during the Lenten season, and the practice complements this project. It will be pointed out to congregants that the tradition of “Lenten Soup-Suppers” is steeped in the practice of “prayer and fasting” during Lent. In German, Lent is called *die Fastenzeit*, literally, “the time of fasting.” Lent has long been understood by Christians around the world as a season to eat lighter and fewer meals, some abstain from meat and other rich foods. Following a light soup-supper, we gathered in the sanctuary for a twenty-minute abbreviated service, centered on a ten-minute Lenten message on prayer. See Appendix A for an outline of the Wednesday Evening six-week schedule, to include Ash Wednesday.

As noted above, the pastor delivered the “Prayer Meditation” each Wednesday evening. I intentionally chose the word “meditation,” rather than “message,” “sermon,”

or “homily” because I know I am treading on sacred and sensitive ground when attempting to alter or expand the way people think about and/or practice prayer. I believe the term “meditation” is less threatening than “sermon” or “message,” implying I am merely giving them something to think about and discuss, which is exactly my intent. The weekly topics of these “messages” built upon each other in an effort to explore and broaden the contours of Christian Prayer, both theologically and practically. The theme of each evening largely followed the chapter topics of this paper. If a pastor were wanting to replicate this project, I recommend he or she base their Wednesday evening message on each chapter of this paper, successively. See Appendix B for a detailed listing of each topic by week.

Wednesday Evening Small Group Discussion

After the corporate meditation and message in the sanctuary, the congregation broke into small groups for reflection and sharing. In my experience, small groups of five or six people are ideal. Since we had about forty-five people each Wednesday evening, seven groups were created. I tried to maintain the integrity of these groups throughout the Wednesday nights.

I opted not to have small group leaders as I did not think it necessary and I wanted each group to function organically. I trusted the Holy Spirit would be at work in these groups. I wrote weekly handouts with clear discussion questions for the groups’ use (see Appendix C). I know the congregation, and while full of people willing to help, they are generally reluctant to serve as adult spiritual leaders/teachers. Also, training up small group leaders would have taken more time and commitment, and I wanted to save the

leaders in the congregation I had to spearhead the Sunday School “Prayer Practices.” The theme of each evening’s small-group discussion mirrored the evening’s pastoral meditation.

I anticipated this experience would be uncomfortable for some as small group sharing is outside the norm for Lutheran Lenten services, or for Lutherans in general. I hoped these Wednesday night prayer meditations and small-group discussions would give the congregation an opportunity to contemplate, process, and discuss the contours of prayer, thus becoming open to broader and deeper forms of prayer within their personal lives.

Sunday School “Prayer Practices”

The goal of the Sunday School Prayer Practices was to expand the congregation’s understanding and practice of prayer by engaging in active, creative, and perhaps new forms of authentic and meaningful prayer. I designed six Sunday School “Prayer Practices” for the six Sundays of Lent. All these Sunday School “classes” were intergenerational, designed with both the young and old in mind. I began recruiting my Sunday School weekly-leaders about two months prior to the start of Lent so they could prepare. I gave them each a detailed outline of their respective Sunday morning “Prayer Project” so they understood my intent and their responsibilities, for which they all seemed appreciative. See Appendix D for an overview of the Prayer Practices by week, and Appendix E for a detailed outline/guide for each week. The Sunday morning Prayer Practices were intended to compliment rather than mirror the Wednesday evening

meditations and small group discussion on prayer. Taken as a whole, the forty-days of Lent served as a congregational immersion in prayer.

Sunday Worship Sermon-Series on Prayer

The Sunday morning Sermon-Series expanded on the theme of prayer and the Sunday School Prayer Practices. In our church, worship follows Sunday School, so it was hoped these sermons would give people time to reflect on and integrate the Prayer Practice they had just participated in beforehand.

The sermons did not follow the Wednesday evening Lenten prayer themes, but rather establish a parallel set of weekly thoughts regarding the topic of prayer. It was my hope and intent that both Sundays' and Wednesdays' programs would work together to stir-up and expand the congregation's understanding and experience of prayer. An overview of the Sunday morning Sermon-Series prayer topics and accompanying scriptures are outlined in Appendix F. They nested with the themes of the Sunday School Prayer Practice, which the congregation had participated in earlier that same morning. Both the Sunday School Prayer Practices and the Sermon Series begin the first Sunday after Ash Wednesday and ended on Psalm Sunday.

Sunday Morning Corporate "Prayers of the People"

A final effort of this project was to help people recover the meaning and meaningfulness of corporate prayer within the Sunday morning worship experience. Corporate prayers within the Lutheran Church are sometimes experienced and/or presented as mechanical and artificial. Often the "Prayer of the People," as our worship

corporate-prayer-time is called, are read by the assigned lay-leader for the day. The petitions are written by the Lutheran publishing house, Augsburg Fortress, for that particular Sunday morning within the liturgical year and are prayed by most Lutheran congregations across the United States. They are thoughtful, beautiful petitions which align with the lectionary themes. Yet, unfortunately, they can also come off as a bit stale and “canned.” As one pastor put it, “They’re supposed to be the ‘Prayers of the People,’ not the ‘Prayers of Augsburg Fortress.’”¹

An often-overlooked aspect of the Lord’s Prayer is it was, in fact, a corporate prayer. The pronouns are all plural, not singular, beginning with the word, “Our.” When Jesus’ disciples asked, “Lord teach us to pray,” Jesus did not teach them a private prayer to be prayed behind closed doors. Rather, Jesus taught them a prayer which was intended to be prayed in a community, as a community. Rather than “My Father,” Jesus taught them to begin, “Our Father.” Corporate prayer may be done in a variety of ways, but it should be done. Christians are meant to pray together.

As an Army Chaplain, I often attend other chaplain’s worship services. The style of worship can vary greatly depending on the chaplain leading the service. Once I was in a small worship service of soldiers and their families. The chaplain asked for prayer requests during the service, something that is not done in my usual Lutheran circles. He had a pen and paper and jotted notes as people made requests. I was surprised and touched at the number of requests voiced, and the depth of sharing by people within the context of a worship service. I was not used to that, and I remember having a warm

¹ I heard Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber say this at a conference about three years ago, though I do not remember which one.

feeling as people shared. I felt compassion for these people, and this compassion seemed a shared experience with all those in the room.

Then the chaplain invited us to pray and began his prayer. When he began it felt to me like all that warmth was sucked from the room. I became lost in the chaplain's tedious and somewhat contrived prayer as he referred to his notes. I grew a little anxious for him, wondering if he would be able to seamlessly include all the petitions without getting tongue-tied. It seems to me, in retrospect, the real prayer happened before the chaplain began to pray, during the time of sharing.

Years later I was reminded of that experience when I gathered with a group of about twenty pastors. The leader invited us to form a circle as we closed our time together in prayer. She then asked for prayer requests and concerns, but she did not take notes. After the first person offered a prayer concern, the leader responded, "Lord in your mercy," which the group took as our cue to reply, "hear our prayer." Then another person offered a spontaneous prayer concern, to which the leader again responded, "Lord in your mercy," and we, "hear our prayer."

This went on for several minutes, and I remember being a little confused at first because no one ever said, "Let us pray." We all still had our eyes open, and I remember thinking, "Are we praying—now?" We were all standing in the circle, I think holding hands, listening to each petition and prayer concern being expressed, many of us nodding in sympathy as it was spoken . . . "Lord, in your mercy," and we responded in unison, "hear our prayer."

What I am sure of now is we were praying. The sharing time and the prayer time had been merged to form a beautiful, organic "prayers of the people." There was no need

for the leader to roll up all the petitions into one masterful compilation of prayer because we were all already in prayer together. We could all just relax and listen to each person as they offered their petitions of joy and sorrow before God and the group. For me, it was one of the most beautiful experiences of corporate prayer I have ever experienced.

This latter experience is what I hoped to somehow replicate in our congregation's corporate prayer time during this project. To that end, knowing that people might be reluctant to speak prayer concerns aloud within worship, I designed a prayer request form to be inserted in the worship bulletin (see Appendix G). My intention was to have the ushers collect these prayer requests during the sermon hymn and give them to the pastor and lay-leader to be read aloud, alternately, during the Prayers of the People. I hoped it would fill our corporate prayer time with renewed meaning and purpose.

Assessment Instruments

I developed two assessment instruments to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the congregational project: (1) a Pre- and Post-Event Survey, and (2) a Post-Event Focus-Group Discussion Guide. The pre- and post-event survey are identical. It is a quasi-experiment and uses both Likert and multiple-choice questions. The experiment is "quasi" for several reasons: (1) the group of people I am evaluating are not random people but rather are active members of my congregation; (2) I am intervening in the group (giving them instruction/guidance on prayer); (3) the group surveyed will have had pre-existing relationships with each other and with me; and (4) I am viewed by most in the group as an authority figure. All these factors, and perhaps others, make this a quasi-experiment rather than a pure experiment. To easily compare the pre-event and post-

event surveys, the questions will remain identical. The intent is to see if participants' attitudes and behaviors toward prayer change by participating in the congregational project, and how those changes might manifest themselves within the survey responses. The Pre/Post Event Survey is found in Appendix H.²

Since the pre- and post-event surveys provided quantitative feedback which may be easily tallied (though not necessarily easily interpreted), I decided to also conduct a post-event focus-group to provide qualitative feedback. I hoped a focus-group would allow me to glean more detailed and personal feedback from a small group of congregational members who consistently participated in the project. I gathered ten of the participants on a subsequent Sunday morning to discuss the project using a set of prepared discussion questions intended to reveal their emotional and subjective views regarding the project. These questions, written intentionally open ended, are outlined in Appendix I.

Thus far in this work we have explored the theological, historical, and scriptural basis for a broadened and deepened understanding of prayer within the context of the Western Christian Church. In this chapter I have outlined the framework of a six-week congregational-based project which, given this theological perspective, hopes to positively impact and renew post-modern Christians' conception and practice of prayer. We have also identified the assessment tools which will be used to evaluate this project. It is now time to turn to the final chapter in which we will examine the outcomes, observations, lessons learned, and conclusions of the congregational project.

² Survey questions were vetted by Bryan C. Auday, PhD, Consultant for Research Methodology Instruction Doctor of Ministry Program, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

CHAPTER SIX

OUTCOMES, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I thoroughly enjoyed creating and executing this congregational project. The value of parishioner-enjoyment in a congregational effort should not be underestimated. If an event has both joy and meaning, its success is almost ensured. Fortunately, this congregational project struck both of those notes, and thus, overall, I believe it was a success.

The project, as outlined in the previous chapter, had five lines of effort: (1) An abbreviated Wednesday Evening Lenten Service with a pastoral “meditation” offered on an aspect of prayer; (2) Wednesday evening small group discussion, following the service; (3) Thematic Sunday School “Prayer Practices;” (4) A Sunday Morning Worship Sermon-Series on the weekly prayer topic; and (5) Corporate “Prayers of the People” during the Sunday worship. In this final chapter, I will reflect on each line of effort, offering my observations, insights, lessons learned, and recommendations.

Setting the Stage

Leading up to the Lenten season, I began preparing for the focus on prayer in a variety of ways. First, I wrote out a brief executive summary of the project’s concept, which could be read in a few minutes (one page). I found this summary helpful as it was an easy reference for me to give to people as I socialized the plan with congregational leaders. I intentionally presented the concept to the Church Council, Education and Worship and Music Committees, as it impacted their areas of responsibility.

Congregational leadership buy-in is critical, and I was careful to secure it before moving on with implementing the project.

Next, I recruited several people to help execute the program. I organized three teams of people: (1) Publicity & Supplies, (2) Sunday School “Prayer Practices” leaders, and (3) Wednesday evening Lenten Soup Supper leaders. We typically have about 125 in worship on a Sunday Morning. I knew involving as many people and families as possible in executing the program would have a favorable bearing upon participation and thus, on the overall impact and effectiveness of the program. I knew the more people participated, the more they would benefit from the program.

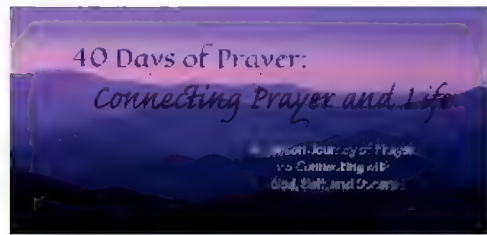
In order to help publicize the program, I created and ordered two large banners, for the sanctuary and fellowship hall, respectively (see Figure 1). I ordered the banners from an online provider.¹ I thought the banners were very reasonable in price, about eighty-dollars each. They were well constructed of a denim-type plastic material and could be reused if desired. I emailed the company a PowerPoint slide of my creation, and requested the banners be reproduced, four by eight feet in size. The company replicated the slide perfectly in both font and color. I was very pleased with the result. It reads: “*40 Days of Prayer: Connecting Prayer and Life/A Lenten Journey of Prayer via Connecting with God, Self, and Others.*” I hung the banners about two weeks before Ash Wednesday and was pleased with the immediate response I received from the congregation. The banners helped build anticipation and momentum around the Lenten program, as well as articulate the theme. I would strongly recommend the use of such signage.

¹ Banners on the Cheap, accessed November 6, 2016, <https://www.bannersonthecheap.com/>.



Figure 1. Congregational Leaders Posing with Banner

Meanwhile, the Publicity Team began running announcements in the Sunday bulletin and in the monthly congregational Newsletter (see Figure 2). They promoted and outlined the weekly program via bulletin-inserts so people knew what to expect each week. They made announcements on Sunday mornings and encouraged participation, especially in the Sunday School “Prayer Practices.” They solicited supplies for the six-weekly Sunday School “Prayer Practices.” I was very pleased with the congregation’s response in providing supplies. Having never done a project such as this before, I did not know how it would be received and/or supported. I found people were eager to help by providing supplies if they knew what was needed. A large basket was set up outside the church office door, and it overflowed with requested supplies needed for the Sunday School Prayer Practices each week.



Intergenerational Sunday School during Lent

March 5th-April 9th

9:45-10:45am in the Fellowship Hall

Each Sunday we will experience a different "Prayer Projects" to help us better understand and practice a form of prayer. To complete these Prayer Projects we need many items which you can help donate. Please see the back of this insert for a list of items. Thank you!

Creating a Lenten Prayer Journal needs:

Stencils	Letter stickers
Transparent tape	Craft stickers/embellishments
Glue sticks	Markers (just to use)
Scrapbook paper	Gel pens (just to use)
craft or tacky liquid glue	Other scrapbooking supplies

The notebooks for the journals have already been donated. Please bring donations to the church by Thursday March 2nd, give to Joanne Shaw.

Remembering Others activity:

- Blank notes cards
- Birthday/get well or thinking of you cards
- Card stock-varity of colors
- Stickers/embellishments
- Pens/markers (just to use)

Please bring these items by March 9th, give to Brenda Price or Joanne Shaw.

Helping Others assembling "Blessing Bags":

-School Supplies	-Non-perishable food items
-Hygiene products	-small household items (ex. dish towels)
-Childrens books	-Small toys
-Brown Paper Grocery Bags	

Please bring any items you wish to donate to church by March 16th, give to Brad & Joni Coleman or Joanne Shaw.

Figure 2. A Bulletin-Insert Publicizing the Congregational Project

Wednesday Evening Lenten Service with Meditation on Prayer

Lent is an ideal time for a Congregational Project. Lutherans are accustomed to attending Wednesday evening Lenten Services, one might say it is in our DNA. About forty-five people regularly attended the Wednesday evening Lenten services. The services are traditionally preceded by a Lenten Soup-Supper, an annual practice in our congregation. The Wednesday evening services within this project were both shorter and less formal than typical Lenten services. Fortunately, and perhaps not surprisingly, both of these aspects were well received by the congregation. The congregation welcomed the meditations on prayer as I had hoped: with open hearts and minds. I attempted to strike a balance in my messages, encouraging parishioners to consider some new ideas about

prayer, but also stepping lightly as I knew I was on treading on sacred ground. I weaved in some humor when possible, which was not too difficult since most all Christians struggle with prayer from time to time.

I kept the weekly meditation to about eight minutes in length. Each of the five week's meditation topics roughly corresponded to the respective chapters within this paper (see Appendix B). I would recommend for someone preparing to implement this program that they read each chapter of this paper and draw their "meditation notes" from them for each week. That should provide more than enough material for each message.

I found the weekly meditations were increasingly well received and attended to as the series went on week by week. Once the people understood the flow of the evening, realizing they would be immediately discussion the evening's meditation, they seemed to tune in even more to the message each week.

Wednesday Evening Small Group Discussion

The small group discussions, which took place immediately following the abbreviated Lenten Service, had some mixed reviews, but I believe overall were well received. I decided to form groups of five to six people, as I believe this is an ideal size for our purposes. On the first Wednesday night, I asked people (confirmed members and older) to draw numbers from a basket to form the groups. This took a little extra time the first night, but I believe the process was a good one and would recommend it. Before we drew the numbers to form the groups, we prayed over the basket and asked the Holy Spirit to be present in the formation of the groups. Most people were good sports about the process. I believe the drawing of numbers had a few benefits: (1) it (mostly) split up

the spouses and family units, which is something I encouraged but did not want to dictate, (2) it mitigated anxiety about finding or fitting into a group, and finally, (3) it seemed fair to people, and most people accept things better, even unpleasant things, if they believe them to be fair. When new people came to the Wednesday service in following weeks, we simply assigned them to a group that kept the group sizes as even as possible. Once assigned to a group, however, I encouraged the members of the group stay with it for the entire program. I reminded them, with a smile, it was only for six weeks.

It was a challenge finding space for all the small groups to meet. We only have five classrooms, yet we had seven groups. In addition to the classrooms, one group met in the narthex, and one in the Pastor's office. In the future, I would recruit another team, the "Wednesday Night Set-Up Team" to help set up the chairs for each space. I was very intentional to have the groups sit in a circle to encourage sharing by all, as I believe the physical space itself is critical to meaningful interaction.² I wanted the spaces set up in advance, so the room set-up would not take away time from the Small Group sharing. It would have been very nice to have had dedicated help setting up these spaces before the service, but as the weeks went on some people began to assist with this effort.

Most people reported they enjoyed the time of fellowship and sharing within their small groups. A few people, however, did not seem as comfortable with the idea of sharing personal thoughts and feelings within a small group context. I found this to be especially true of some of our more senior participants. It seems their generation is not as

² For more on this idea see chapter 14 of Peter Block's, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009).

accustomed to such intimate sharing. This may be something to be mindful of for those attempting to replicate this project in their own congregations.

As I mentioned above, I did not assign small group leaders for a few reasons, (1) It would have taken extra time and effort to train them; (2) I wanted to preserve the congregational leaders I had to serve as the Sunday School “Prayer Practices” leaders; and (3) generally speaking, I knew most people in this congregation were not comfortable serving as adult leaders in spiritual matters. Group members were thus given a weekly handout of discussion questions (see Appendix C), and I allowed the leaders to emerge organically within each group as the discussion time unfolded. As each week progressed, the discussion time improved and deepened, as was evidenced by the groups’ reluctance to close at the assigned time. One of the groups had trouble staying on topic initially but did do better with the discussion as the weeks unfolded. In retrospect, I believe overall the small group discussions were an essential component of this congregational project. Most of the participants reported enjoying the small group time, and attendance remained strong throughout the six weeks.

Sunday School “Prayer Practices”

In some respects, I felt the Sunday School “Prayer Practices” were the heart and soul of this Lenten Project. The plan was each week the congregation would participate in a different form of a “Prayer Practice.” The Sunday School prayer activity was designed for all ages as it was intergenerational, and we had about forty to fifty people attend each week. The overall goal was to expand the congregation’s understanding of what prayer is, and the different forms meaningful prayer may take. Each week during

Lent, the Sunday School had a theme, a scripture verse, assigned leaders, and a prayer activity (see Appendix D).

In week one we made prayer journals during the Sunday School hour. The leader for that week did a wonderful job in setting up the fellowship hall with all the donated materials needed: composition notes books, scrapbook materials, glue, scissors, stencils, etc. I began each Sunday School hour by introducing the overall theme and what we were doing that day. I explained that of all the Sunday prayer practices we would do, this first one was probably most in line with what people think of as a typical prayer practice: journaling. I provided the Sunday School participants with an outline of ideas on how to keep a journal (see Appendix E). I encouraged participants to glue the outline to the inside-cover of their journal, so they could refer to it when journaling. I thought having such a guide might be helpful to people who had never journaled before, so they might know how to begin. I also provided a Lenten Daily Bible Reading schedule of passages which mirrored our weekly Lenten Prayer themes.

I told a story of how once a parishioner asked me how “Bob” was doing. I was confused, and I asked her, “Bob who?” She looked at me surprised and said, “Your father.” My father lived in another state and had never met this woman. I returned her surprised look and asked her how she knew my father’s name? She said, “When we were on our Ladies’ Retreat, I invited people to write their prayer requests in my journal. You wrote your father, Bob, was ill and facing surgery. I’ve been praying for him every day ever since.” I explained to the group this is one way in which journals can be useful: by helping us to remember others in their times of need and praying for them.

Finally, I discussed different ways they could organize their prayer journal using the guide I had provided. I encouraged them to commit to journaling for ten minutes a day during the forty days of Lent. Participants spent the remainder of the Sunday School hour personalizing their journals, especially the front cover. If you have “scrapbook” people in your congregation, they will love this activity and might serve as leaders of this “Prayer Project.”

Week two was another very successful Sunday School prayer venture. The theme was “Remembering Others as Prayer.” A variety of note cards were donated by members for the week’s Prayer Practice. I opened the session with reading our verse for the day and talked about how writing notes to others is a form of “active prayer.” Each note, in fact, is a prayer. People seemed genuinely buoyed by the thought that writing a “care note” to someone counted as prayer! The team provided several church directories, and people were reminded in advance to bring addresses of loved ones, shut-ins, the sick, those in prison, those celebrating birthdays, etc. In addition to cards and other material, many people donated stamps, so there was an abundance of everything needed for the project. That day during Sunday School the body of Christ wrote, addressed, and stamped over two-hundred personal cards to loved ones and strangers alike. At the end of the session we collected the cards in a large basket and placed the basket in front of the altar during worship. It was a visual sign of the tangible prayers we offered that day.

Week three was another Prayer Practice which may have been the most successful in terms of participation and energy. The theme was “Helping Others as Prayer.” We have several educators in our congregation, to include a Jr. High principal, a school nurse, and many teachers. The decision was made by the teams to target school children

from lower-income neighborhoods with this project. People were asked to bring school supplies, hygiene products, non-perishable food, and small toys. They also collected brown paper grocery bags and stickers. The donations poured into the Church office during the week.

We opened the Sunday School hour with a scripture reflection, Isaiah 1:17, on how helping others is a form of active prayer. We then divided into groups and the bags were passed out. First the groups were asked to decorate the bags with colored markers, writing messages of love and encouragement to the school children who would receive them. Then they filled the Blessing Bags” with care items and encouraging notes (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Assembling the “Blessing Bags”

After all the bags were assembled, we set them in the middle of the fellowship hall and formed a circle around them. We joined hands and offered prayers for all the children who would receive the bags that week. I reminded them that their efforts that morning had been “prayers for all the families who would receive these gifts.” There was a wonderful sense being a part of something both meaningful and larger than ourselves as we beheld all the bags we had assembled with love that morning. After our closing prayer, most of the bags were moved to vehicles for delivery, but some were taken into the sanctuary as a visual testimony of the “prayers” we had offered that day (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Dedicating the “Blessing Bags” in Worship

Week four did not go as originally planned. A mother-daughter team were set to spearhead the Sunday School Prayer Practice: Self-care as a form of prayer. The mother was a nurse and was going to discuss diet and nutrition, as well as do some blood-pressure screening. The daughter planned to demonstrate yoga and mindfulness as a means to reduce stress and to increase mobility and flexibility. Unfortunately, a few days before the event, both mother and adult daughter fell ill and were unable to lead the Sunday School hour. Having little time to react, I remembered a “guided meditation” I had participated in years before. I thought I might lead the group in such a time of meditation, so I wrote one based on passages from Matthew and Psalm 23. I also found some meditative music to play in the background.

I opened the Sunday School hour with a reflection on Psalm 139, reminding everyone how we were all “knit together” by God, and of God’s Emmanuel presence with us no matter where we go. Having never done a guided meditation before, I was not sure how the young children would tolerate such an exercise. Therefore, I made the decision to invite the children to break out with a few of our older teens, who took them outside for some fun and games. The adults arranged themselves in a large circle of chairs.

I explained to the group what a guided meditation was and how it worked. At that point I turned on the soft music and lit a few scented candles. I began reading a script, which I stayed with the entire meditation. I read slowly, pausing often for silence:

This meditation will last about fifteen minutes. I invite you to sit in a comfortable position, with your legs uncrossed. If you like, lay your hands with your palms up and open on your lap. I would ask that during this time of guided meditation, you be as still and quiet as possible so as not to disturb others. In this meditation, we’re going to practice letting go of anxiety and fear, resting in God. We will use passages from St. Matthew, and Psalm 23.

I was amazed of the feeling of peace that fell over me and the space we were in while I led the meditation. The people were remarkably still, no one stirred at all the entire time. The mediation almost seemed to fall outside of time, it could have lasted fifteen minutes, or it may have been longer, I honestly did not know. I paused when it felt comfortable to do so, and simply stopped when the reading was done.

There are a couple of notable things I remember about the experience. First, when I finished, no one moved. I mean that literally, no one moved or stirred, no one seemed to want to come out of the meditative and prayerful state we were all in. I remember thinking, after what seemed like a few minutes, I'm going to have to tell these people they need to wake up now and go to church. Slowly, they eventually began to stir, but even then, they stayed in their seats, no one jumped up to leave. It seemed to me they were attempting to prolong the experience.

Secondly, I was truly amazed at how many people told me they had never experienced anything like that before. Most of these people were older, life-long Lutherans. They were amazed at how full of peace and love they felt. One older man came to me with tears in his eyes and quietly thanked me, he said he didn't know why he had never done anything like that before. Several people asked if we could do another guided meditation together soon. I responded that we could do this whenever we want, which somehow also seemed amazing. Many people expressed heart-felt thanks.

Frankly, I had no idea the meditation would be received so well, or touch so many so deeply. I do not know if what happened that Sunday morning is replicative. Maybe it was a unique and special anointing of God's Spirit. I am convinced something powerful and beyond ordinary human means happened that morning. God was there. The spirit of

Jesus instilled peace in the hearts of those salt-of-the-earth people. In the end, what happened that morning, though unplanned and unrehearsed, was anointed by God.

Week five's theme was "Prayer as Enjoying God's Creation." We had decided our prayer activity would be to plant flowers and do some light gardening around the church during the Sunday School hour. The property committee, naturally, spearheaded this "Prayer Project" as the men of the church were only too happy to have some help beautifying the church grounds in the early Spring. They coordinated staging the tools needed and had purchased flowers, plants, and bark mulch. People were encouraged to wear their "yard clothes" and to bring their work gloves to church.

We gathered outside on the front lawn on a beautiful Spring day. I opened with a meditation, introducing the theme. I assured people that when and if they are enjoying and appreciating God's creation, they are in a form of prayer. Then the work began. The property committee organized the people into different work groups, and the people had lots of energy to go to work. Fortunately, it was a beautiful day and the weather was perfect, dry and in the low 60s. If it were going to rain, my plan was to flip this Prayer Activity with the last one scheduled for the following week, but it was not necessary.

After the opening meditation and prayer, people grabbed rakes, hoes and spades and went to work. The children also were happy to pitch in their efforts. Flowers were planted, weeds were pulled, bark mulch was spread, and several garbage bags were filled with debris. The culminating event was planting a tree in the front lawn. We all gathered around as the men lowered the tree into the prepared hole. I led us in a brief dedication of the tree which was planted in memory of a beloved elder of the congregation who had passed away earlier that year. Our church is located on a busy road, and several cars

tooted their horns as we gathered on the front lawn. That morning we testified to the community that we were alive and at work beautifying our little corner of the world. We closed by singing together around that newly planted tree, “He’s Got the Whole World, In His Hands.”

The final Sunday of the program was a Palm Sunday Celebration. Normally Lutherans do not celebrate during Lent, we do not even speak the word, “Alleluia,” but Palm Sunday is an exception. It kicks off Holy Week as we gather to wave palm branches and sing “Hosanna,” celebrating Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Our theme, therefore, that final Sunday of the project was, “Prayer as Celebration.” We held a Square Dance that Sunday during the Sunday School hour to remind us that celebration could be a form of communal prayer, as we danced and laughed together.

I opened the Sunday School with a reading from Psalm 150:1-4a:

Praise the Lord!

Praise God in his sanctuary;

praise him in his mighty firmament!

Praise him for his mighty deeds;

praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

Praise him with trumpet sound;

praise him with lute and harp!

Praise him with tambourine and dance.

We had a couple in our church who had been square dancing for many years (see Figure 5). That morning he served as the “caller” and she taught us the movements. He had the sound system equipment for calling square dances, which he set up that morning.

After my opening scripture and prayer, we were instructed in the basics of how to dosey-doe, promenade, half sashay, and other steps. It was amazing that with just a few moves and a little practice, we could actually dance together, in time, with the music – and it was fun! I remember thinking to myself, “Why have I never done this before?”



Figure 5. Our Square-Dance Leaders

At the end we were already formed in a circle for our closing prayer. As I closed our time that morning in prayer, I could not help but think back upon and give thanks for all the Sundays and Wednesday nights we had experienced as a congregation that Lenten

season. I gave thanks for the journey of prayer we had walked together that season, and along the way we found we not only deepened our understanding and practice of prayer, but also our identity as God's children and as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Sunday Worship Sermon-Series on Prayer

I have always believed that Sunday morning worship should be the culmination, the cherry on the top, so to speak, of our lives as Christians. Or, to put it conversely, Sunday morning worship should not be the “meat” of our Christian faith and practice. I believe many Christians hang too much of their life of faith on Sunday morning worship. Realistically, a Christian cannot survive on a one-hour service of worship once a week. Such faith will lead to a nominalism. In keeping with this view, the core components of the congregational project were not contained within the Sunday morning worship service. Rather, the Wednesday evenings and Sunday School Prayer Projects made up the meat of the program. Sunday morning worship was a recap, if you will, of all we had learned about prayer, and was comprised of two elements: the Sermon-Series and the “Prayers of the People.”

The Sunday morning sermon topics were selected to enhance the congregation's experiences and understanding of prayer. I chose topics which were complementary rather than mirrors of the Wednesday evening and Sunday School topics. I gently informed people at the beginning of the project that if they only attended Sunday worship and not the Wednesday evening and Sunday School components of the Lenten project, they would miss out on the heart of our congregation's *“40 Days of Prayer: Connecting*

Prayer and Life” program. We typically had about 125 people attend worship, while about forty-five people attended the Wednesday evening services.

I believe the sermons helped shed additional light and understanding on prayer, but again, they were not intended to be stand-alone nor comprehensive teachings on prayer. Because of the special nature of this congregational project, I diverted from the lectionary during the season of Lent and selected my own scripture passages, a decision which I gained approval of from the Worship and Music Committee in advance. See Appendix F for an outline of the Sunday morning worship topics and scriptures.

The feedback from the sermon series was very positive. People seemed to enjoy the diversion from the lectionary as a welcome change. There is a joke among Lutherans that you can do almost anything different in worship so long as it is “just for Lent.” Somehow, this reassures people that things will go back to “normal” soon enough. Not surprisingly, I noticed the people who expressed the most appreciation for the Sunday morning sermons on prayer were the ones who were also participating in the Wednesday night Lenten sessions.

Sunday Morning Corporate “Prayers of the People”

Finally, I introduced a variation of our corporate “Prayers of the People” during Sunday morning worship. Again, this particular prayer practice was not meant to be a culminating form of prayer. Rather, I hoped it would serve to demonstrate a meaningful and alternative form of corporate prayer. As I described in the last chapter, this practice came out of my own experience of praying with others with “eyes and hearts wide open.” I offered the prayer request forms for people to fill out, as discussed in the last chapter,

and they did! The first Sunday we received about twenty prayer requests. One thing you can say about Lutherans is they are compliant people. If you hand them a prayer-request form with their bulletin and ask them to fill it out and put into the offering plate, they will do just that. Before that Sunday I was concerned we may not get any written petitions, now I was concerned we had too many.

The Pastor and the Lay-Assistant that day read through each prayer request, and you could have heard a pin drop in the sanctuary. Perhaps people were straining to hear their petition read, or perhaps it was just the novelty of it all, but it seemed that something new and blessed was happening during those Sunday morning prayers. I realize that in many Christian traditions, hearing personal requests prayed for during worship is routine, but this practice was new for this congregation. To my knowledge it had never been done before—to have the Pastor voice my personal concern for someone I love during worship, from behind the altar, this was something extraordinary. The people seemed to warmly embrace the practice. I did not receive any complaints or negative comments about our new form of corporate prayer. If there were some who were uncomfortable with the personal prayer requests, they bit their tongue. After all, it was only for Lent.

Overall, the “*40 Days of Prayer*” Lenten Project exceeded my expectations. It was, in retrospect, a large project with many components. It required a lot of pre-planning and work. Since I have now written the project, I believe implementing it again in another context would be much easier, but to create and execute the project took a lot of effort. I was, therefore, delighted it worked so well. It met my expectations and, at least in part, I believe it was a good start on my goal to deepen and broaden people’s

understanding and practice of prayer. We will now turn to the final part of the paper, the survey instruments and their findings.

Congregational Assessments

Three assessment instruments were used in this project: (1) a Pre-Project Survey containing both Likert and multiple-choice questions, (2) a Post-Project Survey comprised of the same questions, and (3) a Post-Project Focus-Group. Two weeks prior to the start of the project, on a Sunday morning, I handed out the Pre-Event Survey found in Appendix H. I gave the surveys to two separate groups in different settings, and twenty-six people completed the survey. I was careful to give the survey to those who I believed would attend both the Wednesday evening Lenten services and the Sunday morning Sunday School. Having been a part of the congregation for four years, I had a pretty good idea of people's participation patterns. I told those taking the survey that I would also ask them to complete a post-survey, and I encouraged them to participate in all aspects of the Lenten program.

I explained what the survey was to the first group, but I did not give any instructions. For the second group, I also made a point to encourage them to answer the questions honestly, and I added with a smile, "not as you think your pastor would like you to answer." Though the surveys were anonymous, I noticed the second group's responses regarding their practice and understanding of prayer seemed more realistic and less ideal to me than the first groups' responses. I would recommend to anyone replicating this project, especially pastors, that they encourage those taking the surveys, both pre and post-project, to "be not afraid" to give honest answers. One lesson I learned

is when it comes to surveys, especially in a church setting, people tend to want to please God and others, and to look good. This can skew survey results.

After the project was complete, I waited a full month to begin giving the post-project surveys because I wanted to know if the impact of the project had some durability. I kept a list of the names of those who had taken the pre-project survey, and I gave the same post-event survey to the same group of people so I could compare the results. It took about eight weeks post-event to get all the surveys completed and returned, but I was not in a rush because, again, I wanted to know if the results had some lasting impact. I received twenty-three surveys back.

The outcomes were, frankly, very pleasing to me.³ Overall there was positive movement on every question, some more than others, of course, but all moving in what I consider to be an encouraging direction according to the goals of my project.⁴ One of the hypotheses of the project is that people are praying more than they give themselves credit for, since the act of prayer is more basic and organic than many of us realize. Their pre- and post-survey answers to the statement, “I think there is something missing in my prayer life,” demonstrated confirmation of this hypothesis (see Figure 6). Pre-project, 74% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.⁵ In other words, 74% indicated they believed there was something missing from their prayer life before the congregational project. After the project, only 30% of these same respondents agreed or strongly agreed

³ I give credit to the YouTube post <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbYi2x84EW0&t=111s>, accessed June 21, 2018, for helping me to map and analyze the survey data.

⁴ See Appendix J for an overview of the Likert survey data.

⁵ Per the Chicago writing style guide, this chapter will use Arabic numerals and the percent symbol (%) for ease of reading due to its scientific and statistical nature.

with the statement. Apparently, something had happened during the project that made them feel a whole lot better about their prayer life.



Figure 6. Likert Survey Question #5

A corollary question was, “I sometimes feel guilty for not praying often enough.” Pre-project, 60% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Post-project, the number had dropped to 30% (see Figure 7). Conversely, after the project, 61% of those surveyed now disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Clearly, it appeared those who participated in the project were feeling more confident and less guilty about their prayer lives. These were encouraging results.

Another noticeable improvement was observed regarding their experience of corporate prayer. Pre-project, 61% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “The corporate prayers we pray in church are very meaningful to me,” while 39% were unsure or disagreed (See Figure 8).



Figure 7. Likert Survey Question #3



Figure 8. Likert Survey Question #11

While 61% is not a bad number to begin with, after the prayer-project was complete there was marked improvement. During the project, as you may recall, we incorporated hand-written petitions from the congregation into the Sunday morning “Prayers of the People.” Post-survey, an overwhelming 87% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed the Sunday morning corporate prayers were meaningful to them, while those who were ambiguous or disagreed fell to only 13%. Notably, those who strongly agreed jumped from 9% to 30%. Since this project, the Worship and Music Committee has decided to continue the practice of accepting individual prayer petitions during the service to be prayed as a part of the Prayers of the People on the first Sunday of every month.

Another goal of this project was to help people broaden the congregation’s practice of various forms of prayer. During the project the congregation explored a variety of different prayer practices, to include non-traditional forms of prayer, active prayers, and prayers that do not require words. There was evidence in the survey results the people embraced this broader understanding and practice of prayer. To the question, “The best posture for prayer is to fold our hands and bow our heads,” 61% agreed or strongly agreed before the project. After the project, no one strongly agreed with this statement, and remarkably only 17% of respondents now agreed (see Figure 9).

Likewise, only 22% agreed with the statement, “Prayer uses words, even if they are spoken silently” after the project (see Figure 10); while before the program, 61% of those questioned agreed. It seems clear the project helped people to understand and embrace non-verbal forms and active forms of Christian prayer. I attribute this mostly to the teaching on “abiding prayer” in my messages both on Wednesday evening and

Sunday mornings. Of all the messages I delivered during the project, people seemed to appreciate and take to heart that particular teaching the most.

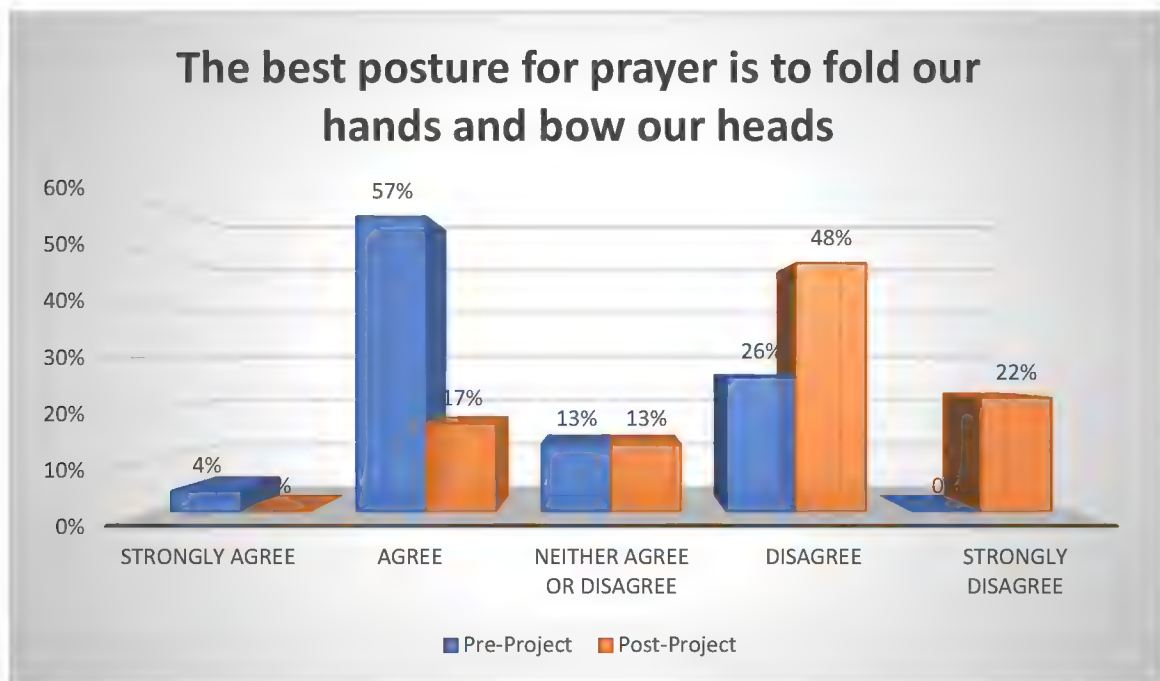


Figure 9. Likert Survey Question #9

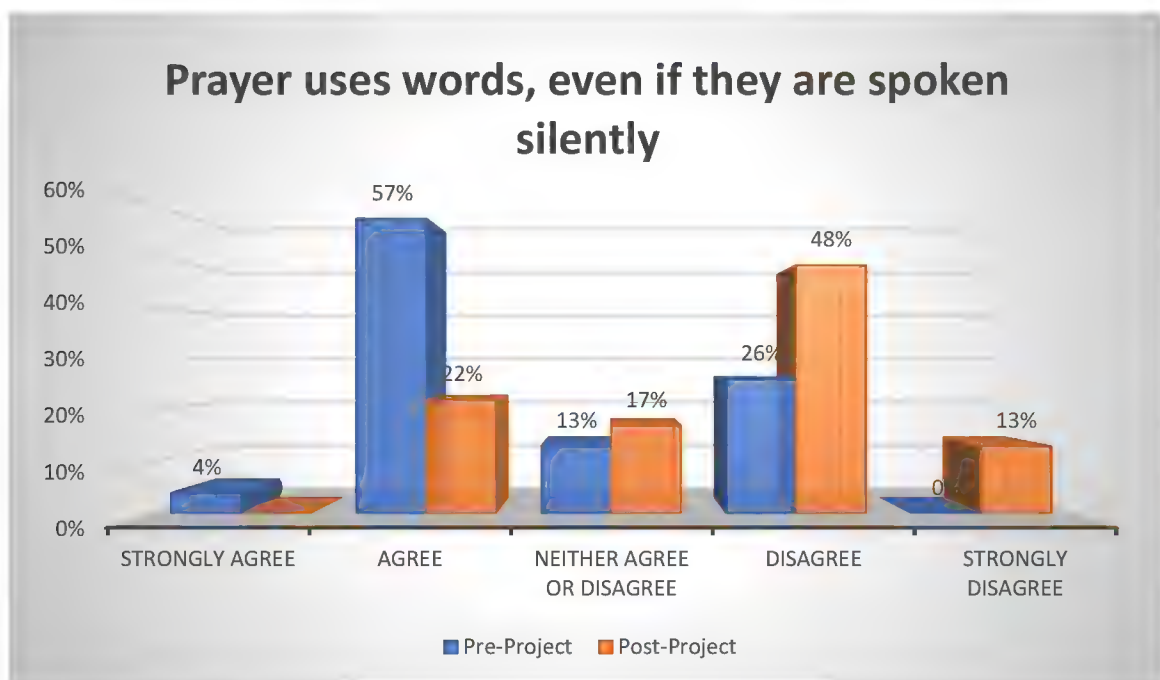


Figure 10. Likert Survey Question #12

Finally, and perhaps most remarkable of all, before the project, 43% reported they “still pretty much pray the way I was taught as a child” (see Figure 11). Post-project, those who agreed with this same statement dropped to only 4%, and no one strongly agreed. People had apparently “put away childish things” and now believed they were praying as adults.



Figure 11. Likert Survey Question #14

The second part of the participant surveys were a series of multiple-choice questions. I understand now why many researchers prefer to use a Likert scale: overall it is easier to interpret and perhaps lends itself to less subjective analysis. In hindsight, some of my questions were written better than others, and I wish I had asked a few that I did not. Still, I was able to glean some interesting and positive trends from the multiple-choice pre- and post-survey questions.

Again, one of the suppositions of my thesis is “We are most-likely praying more than we realize.” I saw this idea picked-up and reflected in participants’ answer to the

question, “How much time do you typically spend in prayer a week?” On the pre-project survey, 67% answered thirty minutes or less per week, while only 20% reported they prayed more than 60 minutes a week (see Figure 12).

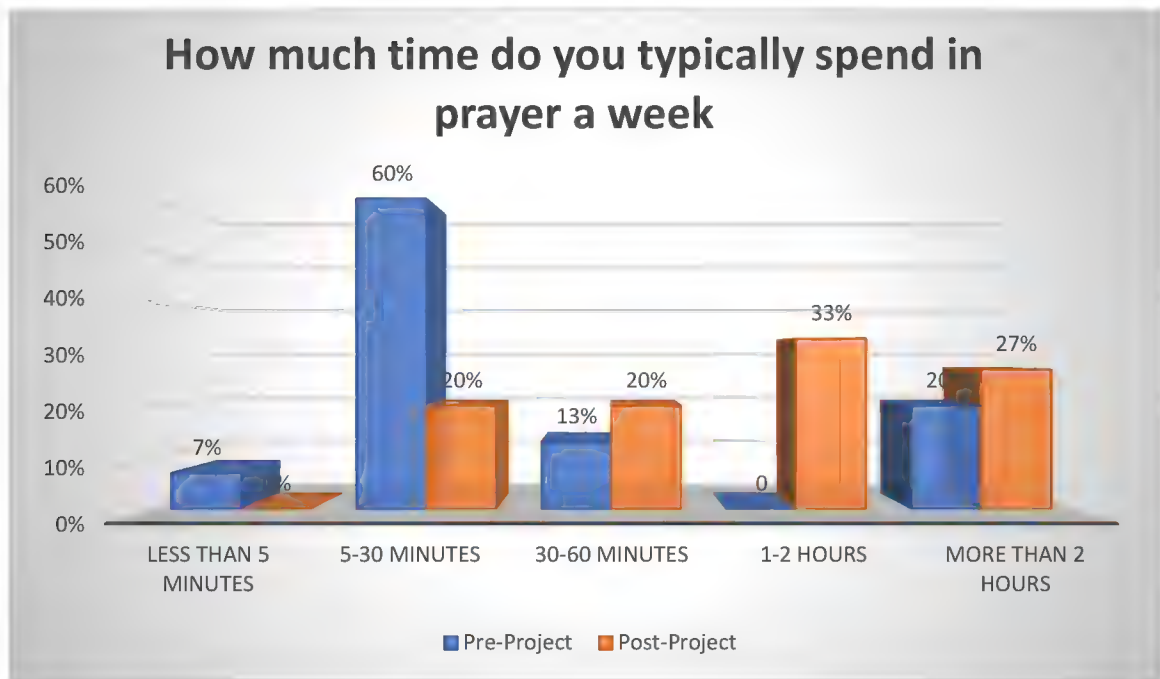


Figure 12. Multiple-Choice Question #1

Post-project, only 20% of those surveyed said they prayed 30 minutes or less a week, while those reporting they prayed more than an hour a week jumped to 60%. Either their prayer lives had increased markedly, and/or they were giving themselves credit for prayers that beforehand they did not realize they were offering. Either way, it was a move in a positive direction.

A related question was, “What type of prayer do you practice most?” The number one answer pre-project was “Intercession and Petitions (praying for others and yourself),” with 47%, while 33% answered “Praise/Thanksgiving” (see Figure 13).



Figure 13. Multiple-Choice Question #2

No one answered, “Abiding Prayer” on the pre-project survey. I suspect most did not know what “abiding prayer” meant, so they did not choose it as an answer. During the congregational project, abiding prayer, also referred to as “*meno-ing*,”⁶ from the Greek word *meno*, meaning “to abide” or, in the vernacular, to “hang out,” was emphasized in my messages. Apparently, those surveyed got the message. Post-project only 20% answered that “Intercession and Petitions” was the type of prayer they practiced most, while “Praise/Thanksgiving” dropped slightly to 27%. Most amazingly, “Abiding Prayer” jumped to 53% of those surveyed. People seemed to have discovered a new-found joy in “hanging-out” with God in prayer.

⁶ See chapter three of this work for more on this Greek word, which is my own term.

The project also seemed to have a broadening effect on the participants' prayer practices. The pre-survey revealed 86% of those surveyed reported they prefer to "sit still in quiet," when they pray (see Figure 14).

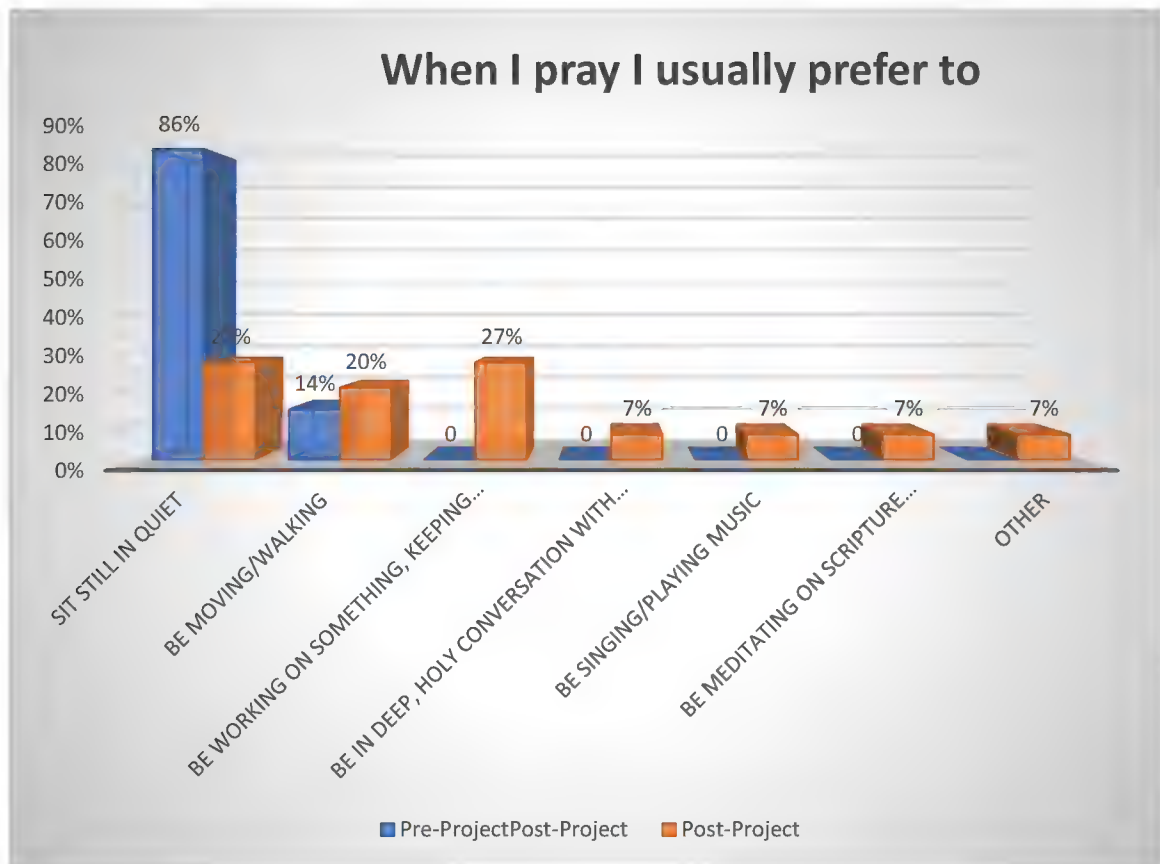


Figure 14. Multiple-Choice Question #8

Post-project, that number had dropped to only 27%. Evidently, they were praying more but not necessarily while sitting still. Now they were also praying while "working on something, keeping my hands busy" (27%), and while "moving/walking" (20%). Again, it appears their understanding and practice of how they might pray had deepened and expanded.

This was also reflected in the question, “Who do you most naturally imagine yourself praying to?”⁷ Pre-project, the majority, 60%, responded “God the Almighty Heavenly Father” (see Figure 15). However, post-project there was a remarkable shift. Interestingly, the answer “Jesus” held steady pre- and post-survey at 27%. However, the big jump was in the answer, “The Holy Spirit who is very near.” Pre-survey only 7% selected the Holy Spirit as the One to whom the most naturally pray. Post-survey this answer jumped to 33%. “God the Father” was still the most popular answer at 40% post-survey, but apparently this image in some people’s minds had lost ground to the Holy Spirit. Again, I found this encouraging as it may have demonstrated that people’s images of God had begun to expand beyond the childhood conception of God as “The Old Man in the Sky.” God was perhaps no longer understood as only the traditional omnipotent and transcendent Father, but also as a comforting and immanent Spirit.



Figure 15. Multiple-Choice Question #3

⁷ I realize this is a poorly constructed sentence, but I wanted to keep the survey in everyday language and as accessible as possible.

A shift which I also found interesting and noteworthy was the answer to the question, “When I pray, I usually use . . .” Only 7% of participants on the pre-project survey selected “A journal” as their answer (see Figure 16). Our first Sunday School “Prayer-Practice” was to create personal prayer journals. I encouraged people to use their journals throughout the forty-days of Lent, both in their private prayer time and in their Wednesday night small groups. It seems some people took this to heart as post-project 27% now responded “A journal” to the same question. Other prayer tools remained basically the same pre- and post-project, however, use of a prayer journal increased noticeably. An anecdotal story is on my last Sunday at this congregation, about six-months post-project, one woman came up to me and said with a smile, “Pastor Renee, I want you to know I am still using my prayer journal – I write in it every day.”

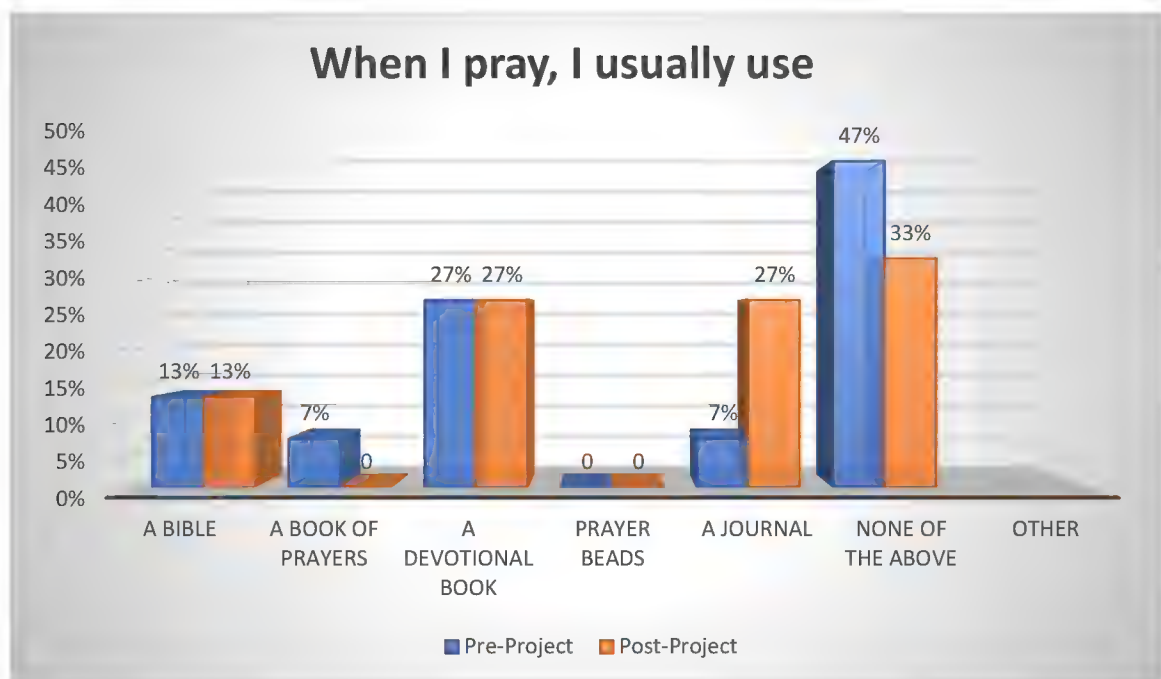


Figure 16. Multiple-Choice Question #9

Before I began the project, I intended to do a session on fasting as I believed it is both an important Christian tradition and an under-emphasized practice within our faith communities today. However, I failed to plan for this appropriately and I did not spotlight the practice in any of the sessions. Yet, I did mention the practice in a few of my Wednesday evening and Sunday morning messages. I practiced intermittent fasting myself during the project and told the congregation how I was experiencing, and, frankly, benefitting from the practice. Though fasting was not emphasized as any one part of the project, the surveys reveal some people apparently did pick up on my reflections on the practice in relation to prayer. Pre-survey, the view of fasting was fairly negative. To the question, “I think fasting as a spiritual discipline is . . . ,” 29% reported they believed it was “an outdated Christian practice,” while 21% felt it was “too legalistic and not necessary” (see Figure 17). Only 7% answered fasting was “an important practice for Christians.”



Figure 17. Multiple Choice Question #10

These findings, though sad to me, were not surprising. Lutherans have a sharp aversion to anything that smacks of “works-righteousness.” Most of my congregants were life-long Lutherans, and they likely associated fasting with a work of piety that flies in the face of “saved by grace alone.” Still, apparently their view of fasting as a spiritual practice softened and shifted during the course of the congregational project. Post-survey, those who said they believed it was an outdated Christian practice dropped to only 7%, and those who thought it was “too legalistic” was cut in half to 7%. Most encouragingly, those who now viewed fasting as “an important practice for Christians” rose to 47%. In retrospect, I wish I had incorporated a Lenten corporate-fast as a part of the project.⁸ I think now it would have been relatively easy to do and, judging by the survey responses, I believe at least some of the people would have been open to the practice. It could have added one more layer of meaning to the overall project.

I will now turn to the final assessment tool, the Focus-Group Discussion. About two months post-project, I met with a group of ten people to conduct a Post-Project Focus-Group Discussion. All ten, five men and five women, had actively participated in the congregational project, and some had served as Sunday School Prayer Practice leaders. We met on a Sunday evening in one of the participants’ homes. The conversation was relaxed and informal, which was my intent. The guiding discussion questions I used may be found in Appendix I, but I found I did not need to stick to them very closely as the conversation unfolded naturally. I thanked them all for coming and explained the purpose and format of our meeting. I told the participants that I would

⁸ I probably would have suggested a one-day-a-week fast, either on Wednesdays or Fridays, during which we eat only one light meal a day, preferably in the evening, in keeping with Christian tradition and the Lenten soup-suppers.

need to take notes during our session together and asked them to forgive my writing during our discussion. In retrospect, I wish I had tape-recorded the meeting, perhaps using my cell phone or a digital recording device. That way I would have had an actual transcript, and I would not have been preoccupied with writing during the meeting.

One of my theories throughout this project is that we leaders in the church do not do enough teaching on the topic of Christian prayer; and the teaching we do is often akin to the Nike commercial: “Just Do It.” As leaders we often assume that people already know how to pray, and we intimate to our parishioners there is no significant difference between praying as a child and praying as an adult. Leaders in the church may (unintentionally?) encourage immaturity in their parishioners’ prayer lives by extolling the virtues of a “child-like” faith when it comes to prayer.

This theory seemed to be borne out by the response of participants during the discussion. One woman commented how much she enjoyed the project overall because it focused on different ways we could pray and on “what prayer *really* was,” noting, “I had never been taught any of that before.” Others agreed, saying they had never received any specific teaching on prayer in the congregation prior to this experience. The people in this congregation were older, and many had been members for twenty years or more. Remarkably, these were people who had faithfully come to church week after week but had never had any substantial instruction on a basic and foundational practice of the Christian faith: prayer.

Another hypothesis of my project was that many people secretly do not enjoy traditional forms of private prayer as they find it difficult. Furthermore, some people experience some level of guilt over this fact. This theory was attested to by several

people. One younger man said when he heard the Lenten focus was going to be prayer, and that we were going to do a whole congregational theme around the topic, he was “sort of dreading it,” because he was “never very good at it.” He said he felt relieved when the very first Wednesday night he heard me say in my message that many people have difficulty praying. He said, “we talked about this in our small group and it was good to know I was not alone.” Another man shared how for years he had tried to get up early to have a morning prayer-time, but he could never stick with it. He said that now he prays while he is out walking the dog in the morning. He went on to say that it has always been his favorite part of the day, and now he considers it his prayer time as well. A woman commented she now has a better understanding of what prayer is, saying, for the “first time in my life I feel like I am praying all the time – I feel like I’m actually really good at this!”

Another of my theories surrounding prayer is that our image of God can negatively or positively impact our prayer practice. One woman said it was hard for her to understand God as some “nebulous being,” and she preferred to think of him as a heavenly Father, as she always found comfort in that image. She did not want to change that. Another participant commented he always thought of God as very remote and “not too friendly.” “I always thought that God was at church, but not really with me in daily life.” He said now when he prays, he feels like God is closer and not “way up there anymore.” A couple of people said the congregational project helped them to think of God as more “ever-present.” One woman commented that she had “never really understood the Holy Spirit before, but now I think of the Holy Spirit as just Jesus’

presence with us.” I thought this was one of the most beautiful statements of the entire evening.

A related theme I heard expressed repeatedly by the group was they appreciated the teaching on “*meno-ing*,” i.e. abiding with Christ. A woman commented she loved that she did not have to come up with words while praying, “I can just sit and rest in God – that is the best way to pray!” Another woman said she now considers gardening her prayer-time. She noted that she always has loved gardening and felt especially close to God when in her garden. “Now,” she said, “gardening is my *meno-ing* time.” One man commented that he was “bored out of his skull” when he tried to sit still and pray, so he never did it. But, he said, “I like woodworking and that’s when I feel closest to God. Now I realize that’s my best prayer-time.” This confirmed an idea I had preached on during the project, that when we are creating something, we are reflecting the image of God, because God is *The* Creator. Such activities, therefore, naturally lend themselves to a God-consciousness form of prayer.

A final theme I heard addressed that evening in the focus-group was the concept of a larger understanding of the connective power of prayer. Many people agreed that before the project, they mostly prayed when they needed something from God. “Most of my prayers were either for myself or my loved ones,” one man said, “and that was pretty much it, other than at church.” A woman commented that this project helped her to understand prayer from a larger view, that “our prayers join with others’ prayers and affect the whole world – us included.” Yet another woman said the thought that prayer changes her more than it changes God was a “revelation.” “God prays through us to change *us*.” Another offered that before the project, he only prayed very deliberately,

“only when I needed something. Now I feel like I pray a lot more.” Another man agreed and shared he recently saw a homeless man on the street while driving to work. He said, “I began praying for him while driving. I’ve never done that before—prayed for someone I didn’t know” he went on to say he wasn’t sure why he started praying for him, but that “I just couldn’t help it.”

Perhaps my favorite comment of the entire evening was from a man who noted, perhaps a little ironically, that he had started having a daily prayer time. He said he had tried years before but never could stick with it. Now, however, he felt like this “new understanding” of prayer had freed him to pray in a more conventional way. He said the project helped him to realize that whenever he was “God-conscious,” he was at prayer, but he also was finding that now he desired some intentional “one-on-one time” with God in prayer most every day. He reported he had also started reading a book on prayer and was “surprised” by this new growth in his faith.⁹

I was very uplifted by our conversation that night, and we ended by talking about beginning a “Care and Prayer” group at the Church, at which we could do something similar to what we were doing that night. We found that prayer opened our hearts in surprising and unexpected ways. Once we put ourselves in a posture of prayer, receptive to God’s Holy Spirit, God will work on us and through us in new and wonderful ways.

After the meeting, I took my notes from that night and turned them into a word cloud, which can be viewed in Figure 18. From the survey results and focus-group, it seems clear most of the people who participated in the “*40 Days of Prayer: Connecting Prayer and Life*” Lenten project did experience some changes in both their understanding

⁹ I had recommended to him Douglas John Hall’s *When You Pray: Thinking Your Way into God’s World*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003).

and reading to re-imagine and deepen my own practice of prayer. For this opportunity I am truly grateful. So also, I hope, by the grace of God, this paper might help other individuals and communities of faith to deepen and renew their own understanding and practice of prayer. In that sense, this work has been and will continue to be my prayer for all those who long for God.

APPENDIX A

WEDNESDAY EVENING SIX-WEEK SCHEDULE

Ash Wednesday:

Imposition of Ashes Service: 6:30-7:00

7:00 – 7:20: Introduction of Program & Evening Meditation on Prayer

7:30 – 8:00: Small Group Sharing

Lenten Services (Five Wednesday's following Ash Wednesday):

6:00 – 6:45: Soup Supper/Fellowship

7:00 – 7:20: Evening Service & Meditation on Prayer

7:30 – 8:00: Small Group Sharing

APPENDIX B

WEDNESDAY EVENING WEEKLY MEDITATION THEMES

The Wednesday evening “Prayer Meditation” topics are as follows:

- Ash Wednesday - Acknowledging the Difficulty Some Have with Prayer and a Brief Overview of the “*40 Days of Prayer*” congregational program
- Week 2 - *The God to Whom we Pray: God is More Than an “Old Man in Heaven.” Exploring our Image of God and how it affects the way we pray.*
- Week 3 - *Coming Out of the Prayer Closet: Pray without Ceasing vs. A Daily Discipline and Can I really pray all the time?*
- Week 4 - *Petitions: Moving God vs. Moving Us. What happens when we ask God for things?*
- Week 5 - *Bifurcation vs. Integration: How can we better integrate our faith with our daily life?*
- Week 6 - *Withdrawal vs. Immersion: Prayer as loving the world and our neighbor. Matthew 25: Being Christ to the other, finding Christ in the other*

APPENDIX C

WEDNESDAY EVENING SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Week One Discussion Guide: Acknowledging the Difficulty Some Have with Prayer

1. What thoughts did you have about the message on prayer this evening?

Discuss any of the following questions you desire, as time allows:

2. How did you learn to pray? Who taught you?
3. How would you describe the way in which you pray?
4. Would you say you have grown in the way you pray, or did you identify with the statement, “Many people still pray pretty much as they did when they were 9 years old”?
5. Is the idea of changing the way you pray appealing or worrying?

Homework: Practice intentional prayer a few times during the week. Notice how you enjoy praying most. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart to new and deeper forms of prayer during this Lenten season.

Week Two Discussion Guide: *The God to Whom We Pray: God is More Than an “Old Man in Heaven.” Exploring our Image of God and how it affects the way we pray.*

1. What thoughts did you have about the message on prayer this evening?

Discuss any of the following questions you desire, as time allows:

2. When you were young, how did you envision God?
3. How has this image changed over the years for you?
4. Do you think of God as nearby or far away?
5. Are you more comfortable with the image of God as an old man up in heaven, or as everywhere, that is as “the One in whom we live and move and have our being”? What are the pros and cons of both?

Homework: Read and reflect on the following scriptures. Psalm 139: 1-18; Acts 17:22-28; Eph. 4:1-6; Col. 1:15-17. What do they say to you about God and/or prayer? Record your thoughts in your prayer journal. Write down the names of people you are thinking of in a prayerful way this week.

Week Three Discussion Guide: *Coming Out of the Prayer Closet: Pray without Ceasing vs. A Daily Discipline. Can I really pray all the time?*

1. What thoughts did you have about the message on prayer this evening?

Discuss any of the following questions you desire, as time allows:

2. What do you think of the idea of praying without ceasing? How might such a concept change your view of what prayer is?
3. Is the idea of not having a set time for daily prayer a relief or a disappointment?
4. What do you make of the idea of abiding with or “meno-ing” with God? What might that look like for you personally?
5. What does the saying, “To work is to pray” mean to you?

Homework: Read and reflect on the following scriptures: Phil. 1:3-6; 1 Thes. 5:16-19; Ps. 8. Attempt to practice prayer in new forms this week, perhaps while working, walking, or listening deeply to another person, etc. Continue to record your thoughts in your prayer journal. Write down and review the names of people you are thinking of in a prayerful way this week.

Week Four Discussion Guide: *Petitions: Moving God vs. Moving Us. What happens when we ask God for things?*

1. What thoughts did you have about the message on prayer this evening?

Discuss any of the following questions you desire, as time allows:

2. What do you believe happens when we pray petitions to God?
3. Has prayer ever moved you to action?
4. If prayer is more about moving us rather than God, should we continue the church prayer-chain? Why or why not?
5. How does the Lord’s Prayer inform us about how we should pray?

Homework: Read and reflect on prayer in Matthew 6:7-15 and Rom. 8:26-27. Write the names of people in your Lenten Journal who need prayer, review their names daily. Act on one of your prayers this week.

Week Five Discussion Guide: *Bifurcation vs. Integration: How can we better integrate our faith with our daily life?*

1. What thoughts did you have about the message on prayer this evening?

Discuss any of the following questions you desire, as time allows:

2. How might you describe the difference between religion and spirituality?
3. What do you think of mixing one's faith with their political views or with one's work?
4. Where do you find a disconnect between your daily life and your faith?
5. What does it mean to you to be in the world but not of the world?

Homework: Record in your journal how you might better integrate your faith with your daily life. Identify disconnects. Take one practical step this week to better integrate your life as a whole. Continue to record your thoughts in your prayer journal. Write down and review the names of people you are thinking of in a prayerful way.

Week Six Discussion Guide: *Withdrawal vs. Immersion: Prayer as loving the world and our neighbor. Matthew 25: Being Christ to the other, finding Christ in the other*

1. What thoughts did you have about the message on prayer this evening?

Discuss any of the following questions you desire, as time allows:

1. When have you experienced or seen Christ in a stranger?
2. What do you make of the idea of Holy Communion being more about experiencing the fellowship of people as the Body of Christ rather than the elements of bread and wine?
3. How has this Lenten focus on prayer impacted or changed your thinking and/or practice of prayer?
4. What are your overall take-aways from this study?

APPENDIX D

SUNDAY SCHOOL “PRAYER PRACTICES” OVERVIEW

Date	Title/Theme	Leaders	Theme Verse	Activity
1st Sunday of Lent	Intentional Reflection-Time as Prayer	Renee Kiel & Joanne Sifferd ¹⁰	Luke 2:19	Create Lenten Prayer Journals to help us take intentional time during Lent to connect with God, self and others in prayer.
2nd Sunday in Lent	Re-membering Others as Prayer	Brenda Thompson	Gal 6:2	Write note cards to shut-ins, the sick, those in prison, college/military, those celebrating birthdays, etc.
3rd Sunday in Lent	Helping Others as Prayer	Joni & Brad Jones	Isaiah 1:17	Assemble “Blessing Bags” containing food items, school supplies, hygiene products, children’s books, and small toys, to give to neighborhood low-income school children.
4th Sunday in Lent	Caring for Our Mind and Body as Prayer	Sheila and Stacey Cruys	Ps 139:14	Give a class on nutrition, fasting, general health strategies (Sheila); and a 15-minute Meditative Stretching exercise (Stacy)
5th Sunday in Lent	Enjoying Creation as Prayer	Jamey Ricard & Dan Boggess	Isaiah 55:12	Planting flowers and beautifying the church property; perhaps plant a tree.
6th Sunday in Lent	Celebration as Prayer (Psalm Sunday)	Billy and Sue Blissett	Ps 150	Introduction to Square Dancing

¹⁰ The names found in the appendices are fictitious. They have been changed to protect privacy.

APPENDIX E

“PRAYER PRACTICES” – WEEKLY LEADERS’ GUIDE

Prayer Practices – Week 1

Prayer as Reflection: Guide to Keeping a Prayer Journal

One form of prayer is when we take intentional time to reflect on the Divine within us and others; attuning to God’s presence and listening for God’s voice in our lives. Writing or drawing can open pathways to connecting with God, others, and ourselves. For many, journaling opens doors to peace, beauty, and a renewed sense of being connected to a good and gracious God.

Two Different Ways to Keep a Prayer Journal:

1. By Date: Record all entries together, by date in your journal.
2. By Categories: Set up page headings, such as “On My Heart,” “Word/Verse of the Day,” and record each entry on the page of its respective category.

Some Ideas for Keeping a Prayer Journal:

1. Commit to 10 minutes a day of “journal time” for the 40 days of Lent
2. Read the assigned Bible passage for Lent and record one word or phrase that struck you.
3. Many studies have shown that grateful people are happier people. Record one thing which made you happy recently, or that you enjoyed or brought you joy.
4. Think of one person, place or situation that is on your heart today. Record their name in your journal.
5. Use the church directory to remember and pray for one family a day. Make it a point to greet them on Sunday – tell them they were in your prayers this week!
6. Who is hurting today, how can I comfort them?
7. Who has an upcoming celebration, how can I rejoice with them?
8. Think of one kind thing you can do for yourself this week to care for your soul.
9. Make a dream list of things you’d like to do in the next month or year, or places you’d like to go, or books you’d like to read.
10. God is the Creator, therefore, when we create, we reflect the image of God inside us. What is something you would like to create today? (Remember: Creating something good or beautiful is a form of prayer.)
11. Have a song stuck in your head? Record a phrase of a favorite hymn or song.

There is no wrong way to keep a prayer journal – as St. Augustine said, “Love God and do as you please!”

Prayer Practices – Week 1 (Continued)

40 Days of Bible Readings for Lent

Connecting Prayer and Life: A Lenten Journey of Experiencing Prayer by Connecting with God, Self, and Others

Week 1: Intentional Time for Reflection as Prayer

Mar 6: Psalm 46
Mar 7: John 15:4-5
Mar 8: Mark 1:35-37
Mar 9: 1 Kings 19:11-13
Mar 10: Psalm 119:10-16
Mar 11: Luke 2:15-19

Week 5: Appreciating God's Creation as Prayer

Apr 3: Lev. 25:1-5
Apr 4: Job 12:7-10
Apr 5: Romans 8:19-21
Apr 6: Psalm 24:1-2
Apr 7: Col 1:15-16
Apr 8: Psalm 104:10-24

Week 2: Re-membering Our Self and Others as Prayer

Mar 13: Luke 23:39-43
Mar 14: 1 Cor. 12:12-20
Mar 15: Luke 15:11-17
Mar 16: Galatians 2:9-10
Mar 17: 1 Cor. 11:23-26
Mar 18: Isaiah 49:14-16a

Week 6: Celebrations as Prayer

Apr 10: Psalm 150
Apr 11: Ruth 4:13-17
Apr 12: Acts 2:44-47
Apr 13: Luke 15:8-9
Apr 14: Rev. 19:6-7
Apr 15: Psalm 100

Week 3: Caring for Others as Prayer

Mar 20: Luke 10:25-37
Mar 21: Ruth 1:8-22
Mar 22: Matthew 1:18-25
Mar 23: 1 Cor 13:1-8
Mar 24: John 12:1-7
Mar 25: Isaiah 58:6-9

Week 4: Caring for Our Bodies & Minds as Prayer

Mar 27: 1 Cor. 6:12-20
Mar 28: Matthew 6:16-18
Mar 29: Psalm 46:8-11
Mar 30: Gen. 1:27-31
Mar 31: Psalm 139:13-16
Apr 01: Phil. 4:8-9

Prayer Practices – Week 2

Remembering Others as Prayer: Writing Thoughtful Cards

Overall Theme: When we remember another, we are at prayer.

Leaders: Brenda Thompson

Theme verse: Gal 6:2

Sunday School Project: Create and Write note cards to shut-ins, the sick, those in prison, those celebrating birthdays, etc.

Supplies Needed:

Church Directories	Blank Note Cards
Addresses of those you'd like to write	Colored Markers
Rulers	Pens and Pencils
Designer paper	Scissors
Glue Sticks	Transparent Tape
Glitter	Craft stickers
Stencils	Stamps
Envelops of all sizes	Large basket to collect all the cards

Before the Event

- Beginning Feb 19, the congregation will be provided a list of items needed for Sunday School Projects during Lent. The above list of supplies will be a part of the list included in the weekly bulletin.
- Brenda will spearhead collecting the supplies needed from the congregation and promote the event via announcements, etc.

Sunday School, March 12, 9:45 – 10:45 am

- Brenda will ensure the tables/chairs are set up in advance in the Fellowship Hall, with supplies dispersed on the tables.
- Pastor will introduce theme verse and discuss how one form of prayer is when we take intentional time to write another person a note (5 minutes).
- Brenda will give an overview of one way to make and decorate a notecard using designer paper/glue, etc., and share how impactful and easy writing a note can be (5 minutes).
- People will then be given the supplies needed to make and write their cards (prayers). (30 minutes).
- At the end all the notes will be collected in a large basket, which will be placed in front of the altar during worship.

Prayer Practices – Week 3

Helping Others as Prayer: Making and Giving “Blessing Bags”

Overall Theme: When we help others, we are at prayer.

Leaders: Joni and Brad Jones

Theme verse: Isaiah 1:17

Sunday School Project: Assemble “Blessing Bags” containing food items, school supplies, hygiene products, children’s books, and small toys, etc., to give to low-income school children and their families.

Supplies Needed: Canned food

- Children’s books
- School Supplies
- Hygiene products
- Small toys
- Brown Grocery Bags
- Markers
- Staplers
- Ribbon (optional)

Before the Event

- Beginning Feb 19, the congregation will be provided a list of items needed for Sunday School Projects during Lent. The above list of supplies will be a part of the list included in the weekly bulletin.
- Joni will spearhead collecting the supplies needed from the congregation and promote the event via announcements, etc.

Sunday School, March 19, 9:45 – 10:45 am

- Joni will ensure the tables/chairs are set up in advance in the Fellowship Hall, with supplies dispersed on the tables.
- Pastor will introduce the theme verse and discuss how helping our neighbor is a form of prayer (5 minutes).
- Joni will give an overview of how to put together a Blessing Bag (5 minutes).
- People will then be given the supplies needed to create a Blessing Bag. (30 minutes).
- At the end all the Blessing Bags will be collected, and some will be placed in front of the altar during worship.

Prayer Practices – Week 4

Caring for our Mind and Body as Prayer: Nutrition, Health, and Meditation

Overall Theme: Caring for our mind and our body is part of a living a prayerful life.

Leaders: Sheila & Stacy Cruys

Theme verse: Ps 139:14

Sunday School Project: Give a short talk on nutrition, fasting, general health strategies (Sheila – 15 minutes); and a Meditative and/or Stretching exercise (Stacy – 15 minutes).

Supplies Needed: I'm not sure what you each may need for this endeavor, but I am willing to support. Please let me know your thoughts/needs.

- Soft music?
- Scented Candles?
- Encourage congregation to wear comfortable clothing and shoes in which they can do stretching exercises
- Other supplies/items needed?

Before the Event

- Beginning Feb 19, the congregation will be provided a list of items needed for Sunday School Projects during Lent. The above list of supplies will be a part of the list included in the weekly bulletin.
- Sheila and Stacy will spearhead promoting the event via announcements, etc.

Sunday School, March 26, 9:45 – 10:45 am

- Sheila and Stacy will ensure the chairs and/or tables are set up in advance in the Fellowship Hall as needed, with any needed supplies dispersed on the tables.
- Pastor will introduce the theme verse and discuss how caring for our minds and our bodies is a form of prayer. She will also briefly discuss the Christian practice of fasting (10 minutes).
- Sheila will give a talk on caring for our bodies, discussing nutrition and general health strategies. Sheila this is your area of expertise, so I will leave it up to you how best to use this time and opportunity. One thought I had was to perhaps create and distribute a checklist of things we can do to promote our health, i.e. get a flu shot every year, etc. (10 minutes).
- Stacy will then lead the class in 15 minutes of light stretching and meditation to promote mobility, flexibility and mental health.
- Pastor will close the time out with group prayer.

Prayer Practices – Week 5

Enjoying Creation as Prayer: Planting Flowers and Beautifying the Church Property

Overall Theme: When we enjoy and care for God's creation, we are at prayer.

Leaders: Jamey Smith & Dan Boggess

Theme verse: Isaiah 55:12

Sunday School Project: Planting flowers and beautifying the church property; perhaps plant a tree. Other duties as assigned by the leaders.

Supplies Needed:

- Gloves
- Rakes
- Spades
- Garbage Bags
- Flowers to plant (prefer perennials that can take full sun).
- Mulch
- Encourage congregation to wear comfortable clothing and shoes in which they can do yard work, and bring yard gloves

Before the Event

- Beginning Feb 19, the congregation will be provided a list of items needed for Sunday School Projects during Lent. The above list of supplies will be a part of the list included in the weekly bulletin.
- Jamey and Dan will spearhead promoting the event via announcements, etc.

Sunday School, Apr, 9:45 – 10:45 am

- Jamey and Dan will ensure all the supplies are staged for the project.
- We will meet in the fellowship hall, where Pastor will introduce the theme verse and discuss how enjoying and caring for creation is a form of prayer. (5 minutes).
- Jamey and Dan will then give people instructions on what needs to be done and how to form teams to accomplish the tasks at hand. (40 minutes).
- At 10:40 we will meet back in the Fellowship hall for closing thoughts and prayer led by Pastor.

Prayer Practices – Week 6

Celebration as Prayer: An Introduction to Square Dancing

Overall Theme: When we celebrate life together, we are at prayer.

Leaders: Sue and Billy Blissett

Theme verse: Ps 150

Sunday School Project: Square-Dance as led by Billy and Sue Freeman

Supplies Needed:

- Music
- Sound system
- Encourage congregation to wear comfortable clothing and shoes in which they can square-dance

Before the Event

- Beginning Feb 19, the congregation will be provided a list of items needed for Sunday School Projects during Lent. The above list of supplies will be a part of the list included in the weekly bulletin.
- Billy and Sue will spearhead promoting the event via announcements, etc.

Sunday School, Apr, 9:45 – 10:45 am

- Billy and Sue will ensure the Fellowship Hall is set up for Square Dancing and that all needed supplies and equipment is ready.
- 9:45 - We will meet in the fellowship hall and Pastor will introduce the theme verse and discuss how celebrating together as a community is a form of prayer. (5 minutes).
- Billy and Sue will then give instructions and lead us in some simple Square-Dancing techniques and movements. (35 minutes).
- At 10:40 Pastor will give closing thoughts and prayer.

APPENDIX F

SUNDAY MORNING SERMON-SERIES ON PRAYER

DATE	Sunday Worship Sermon Topic	Scripture
1st Sunday of Lent	An Azimuth Check: Reflection time in the desert as a form of prayer	Mt 4:1-11; 1 Kings 19:7-9, 11-13a
2nd Sunday of Lent	Redemptive Remembering: Remembering who we are, whose we are, and where we fit in the larger body of Christ as a form of prayer	Luke 15:11-24; 1 Cor. 12:12-20; 26; Deut. 26:1-11
3rd Sunday of Lent	Being Christ to Christ: Helping others as prayer	Matthew 25:31-46; 1 John 3:16-18; Amos 8:3-7
4th Sunday of Lent	Cracked Pots: Caring for our minds and bodies (even as we age) as prayer	Luke 2:25-33, 36-38; 1 Cor. 6:12-20; Gen. 1:27-31
5th Sunday of Lent	Stones Bursting into Cheers! Experiencing the beauty and awe of nature as prayer	Luke 19:35-40; Ps 19:1-4a; Romans 1:18- 20
6th Sunday of Lent	Palm Sunday: Hosanna in the Highest! Celebration as prayer	Mt 21:1-11; Ex 15:1-2, 20; Rev 5:11-14

APPENDIX G
CORPORATE PRAYER REQUEST FORM

The “Prayers of the People” Request Form

Please read the following prayer concern/thanksgiving aloud during the Prayers of the
People in Worship this morning. (Please print legibly)

We pray/give thanks for

Because/so that

Submitted by

(optional): _____

APPENDIX H

SURVEY ON PRAYER

This survey is voluntary and confidential. The compiled results of the surveys are intended to be used in a Doctor of Ministry thesis research project and paper written by Pastor Renee Kiel.

Demographic Information:

1. Gender
 - a. Male
 - b. Female

2. Age
 - a. 1-25
 - b. 25-39
 - c. 40-55
 - d. 55-70
 - e. 70+

3. I have been attending church regularly
 - a. All my life
 - b. For the last 10 years or more
 - c. For the last 2-10 years
 - d. I am not currently attending church regularly
 - e. I have never attended church regularly

Don't overthink any question, just give your honest response. Answer the following questions on a scale of 1-5 with:

1. *Strongly disagree*
2. *Disagree*
3. *Neither agree nor disagree*
4. *Agree*
5. *Strongly agree*

1. My prayer life is a central component of my faith. _____
2. When I pray, I usually do more talking than listening. _____
3. I sometimes feel guilty for not praying often enough. _____

4. I have a good understanding of what prayer is and how to do it. _____
5. I think there is something missing in my prayer life. _____
6. I believe prayer moves God to sometimes act and intervene in ways God otherwise might not. _____
7. I believe serving others is a form of prayer. _____
8. Prayer for me feels more like a duty than a delight. _____
9. The best posture for prayer is to fold our hands and bow our heads. _____
10. I have a regular time of prayer most every day. _____
11. The corporate prayers we pray in church are very meaningful to me. _____
12. Prayer uses words, even if they are spoken silently. _____
13. When I pray, I feel God/Jesus is very close to me. _____
14. I still pretty much pray the way I was taught as a child. _____
15. Those who pray regularly are overall healthier and happier people. _____
16. I don't believe prayer is something we should have to work at. _____

Multiple Choice: Please circle only one answer.

1. How much time do you *typically* spend in prayer a week?
 - a. Less than 5 minutes
 - b. 5-30 minutes
 - c. 30-60 minutes
 - d. 1-2 hours
 - e. More than 2 hours
2. What type of prayer do you practice *most*?
 - a. Intercession & Petitions (praying for others and yourself)
 - b. Praise & Thanksgiving
 - c. Confession
 - d. Abiding Prayer
 - e. Other _____

3. When you pray, who do you most naturally imagine yourself praying to?
- a. God the Almighty Heavenly Father
 - b. The Holy Spirit who is very near
 - c. The person of Jesus
 - d. A Judge
 - e. Other _____
4. Do you believe prayer mostly influences
- a. God
 - b. The one who prays
 - c. The ones for whom you pray
 - d. None of the above
5. I do most of my praying
- a. In Church during worship
 - b. In a Prayer/Bible-Study Group
 - c. By myself
 - d. With a friend/spouse
 - e. At meal times
 - f. Other _____
6. I would describe my practice of prayer as
- a. Set: In a consistent time and place
 - b. Fluid: I pray when and where the need arises
7. When I pray by myself, I most often pray
- a. Informally throughout the day
 - b. While driving/commuting
 - c. While working
 - d. When enjoying the outdoors/nature
 - e. At bedtime
 - f. During my daily-devotion time
 - g. Other _____
8. When I pray I usually prefer to
- a. Sit still in quiet
 - b. Be moving/walking, etc.
 - c. Be working on something, keeping my hands busy
 - d. Be in deep, holy conversation with others
 - e. Be singing/playing music
 - f. Be meditating on Scripture/devotionals
 - g. Other _____

9. When I pray, I usually use
- a. A Bible
 - b. A book of prayers
 - c. A devotional book
 - d. Prayer beads
 - e. A journal
 - f. None of the above
 - g. Other _____
10. I think fasting as a spiritual discipline is
- a. An outdated Christian practice
 - b. An important practice for Christians
 - c. Dangerous – I wouldn't do it
 - d. Probably something I should do, but don't
 - e. Too legalistic and not necessary
 - f. Other _____
11. I have fasted for spiritual reasons
- a. Never
 - b. Once or twice in my life
 - c. A few times a year for several years
 - d. A few times a month for several years
 - e. During Lent/Holy Week for several years

Thank you for taking this survey! Please leave it in the basket by the exit doors, or give it to Pastor Renee

APPENDIX I

FOCUS-GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think are some of the greatest impediments to prayer for Christians?
2. Did your understanding of prayer change during this Lenten focus on prayer, and if so, how?
3. Was there anything about the program that upset or troubled you? If so, are you able to share that with the group?
4. How might this program affect your attitudes and practice of prayer?
5. How might this program affect your attitudes and practice of congregational/corporate prayer?
6. What were some things about the program you might recommend doing differently?
7. What did you appreciate or enjoy most about the program?

APPENDIX J

PRE-PROJECT LIKERT SURVEY RESULTS

Pre-Project Likert Survey								
Q #	Question	Total	Strongly		Neither		Strongly	Total
			Agree	Disagree	Agree or	Disagree		
1	My prayer life is a central component of my faith.	23	35%	48%	4%	13%	0%	100%
2	When I pray, I usually do more talking than listening.	23	17%	61%	13%	4%	4%	100%
3	I sometimes feel guilty for not praying often enough.	23	17%	43%	9%	17%	13%	100%
4	I have a good understanding of what prayer is and how to do it.	23	17%	39%	13%	17%	13%	100%
5	I think there is something missing in my prayer life.	23	26%	48%	4%	17%	4%	100%
6	I believe prayer moves God to sometimes act and intervene in ways God otherwise might not.	23	17%	61%	22%	0%	0%	100%
7	I believe serving others is a form of prayer.	23	26%	70%	0%	0%	4%	100%
8	Prayer for me feels more like a duty than a delight.	23	17%	39%	9%	17%	17%	100%
9	The best posture for prayer is to fold our hands and bow our heads.	23	4%	57%	13%	26%	0%	100%
10	I have a regular time of prayer most every day.	23	13%	39%	9%	35%	4%	100%
11	The corporate prayers we pray in church are very meaningful to me.	23	9%	52%	26%	13%	0%	100%
12	Prayer uses words, even if they are spoken silently.	23	0%	61%	13%	26%	0%	100%
13	When I pray, I feel God/Jesus is very close to me.	23	22%	48%	17%	9%	4%	100%
14	I still pretty much pray the way I was taught as a child.	23	4%	39%	9%	43%	4%	100%
15	Those who pray regularly are overall healthier and happier people.	23	30%	52%	13%	0%	4%	100%
16	I don't believe prayer is something we should have to work at.	23	0%	30%	9%	61%	0%	100%

APPENDIX K

POST-PROJECT LIKERT SURVEY RESULTS

Post-Project Likert Survey								
Q #	Question	Total	Strongly		Neither		Strongly	Total
			Agree	Agree	Agree or	Disagree		
1	My prayer life is a central component of my faith.	23	43%	57%	0%	0%	0%	100%
2	When I pray, I usually do more talking than listening.	23	4%	35%	4%	43%	13%	100%
3	I sometimes feel guilty for not praying often enough.	23	4%	26%	4%	48%	17%	100%
4	I have a good understanding of what prayer is and how to do it.	23	39%	61%	0%	0%	0%	100%
5	I think there is something missing in my prayer life.	23	4%	26%	0%	57%	13%	100%
6	I believe prayer moves God to sometimes act and intervene in ways God otherwise might not.	23	0%	52%	17%	30%	0%	100%
7	I believe serving others is a form of prayer.	23	48%	52%	0%	0%	0%	100%
8	Prayer for me feels more like a duty than a delight.	23	0%	17%	0%	57%	26%	100%
9	The best posture for prayer is to fold our hands and bow our heads.	23	0%	17%	13%	48%	22%	100%
10	I have a regular time of prayer most every day.	23	9%	35%	13%	39%	4%	100%
11	The corporate prayers we pray in church are very meaningful to me.	23	30%	57%	9%	4%	0%	100%
12	Prayer uses words, even if they are spoken silently.	23	0%	22%	17%	48%	13%	100%
13	When I pray, I feel God/Jesus is very close to me.	23	35%	57%	4%	4%	0%	100%
14	I still pretty much pray the way I was taught as a child.	23	0%	4%	0%	78%	17%	100%
15	Those who pray regularly are overall healthier and happier people.	23	43%	48%	4%	4%	0%	100%
16	I don't believe prayer is something we should have to work at.	23	22%	52%	0%	22%	4%	100%

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VITA

Renee Reynolds Kiel, born in 1962, is a native of Des Moines, Iowa, where she lived the first eighteen years of her life. She was awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree, Cum Laude, in 1985, from Oral Roberts University, majoring in Theological and Historical Studies with a minor in New Testament. In May 2000, she was awarded a Master of Divinity degree from The Houston Graduate School of Theology. She was then ordained by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and served for several years as a parish pastor. She was commissioned as an Army Chaplain in 2002, serving in the Army Reserves. In 2005 she was deployed and served a combat tour in Afghanistan.

Currently she serves as an Army Chaplain (Lieutenant Colonel) for the U. S. Army Reserve Command in Fort Bragg, NC, as Chief of Soldier and Family Ministry. Among other things, she oversees Soldier and Family Readiness and Resiliency programs, the Army Reserve Clinical Pastoral Education for Chaplains, and Chaplain Suicide Prevention Strategies across the Army. She has recently been selected to attend the Army's War College. Chaplain Kiel's military awards include the Defense Meritorious Service Medal, Meritorious Service Medal (4rd Award), Army Commendation Medal (3rd Award), Army Achievement Medal (8th Award).

Chaplain (LTC) Kiel began her doctoral work in 2015 and anticipates graduating from Gordon-Conwell with a Doctor of Ministry degree in February 2019. She and her husband, David, of 31 years, have three grown sons, Joseph, Justin and Kristopher. Currently they reside in Fayetteville, NC. They look forward to continued service in ministry to the Church and the world.